

Nazi, Monkey, Séance:

A Broken Book

Tom Baker

The Moon Publishing & Printing

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Author's Note:

Last night I dreamt the Major was reading this book. I even dreamt the cover. He jumped up from his chair, excited; a comical/grotesque figure, really. If I could remember what the cover looked like exactly, I might be able to reproduce it. I've done that before. I also dreamt I was walking on a hot summer day, carrying a huge paper sack. I don't know what the hell was in that sack (could have been Chinese take-out for all I know), but I had a clear mental image of coming back to a house, opening it up, unwrapping the plastic bundle inside and finding... A dead baby? Or, a severed head? One or the other. Of course, my macabre little mind dreamt up a cannibalistic scenario wherein the protagonist actually ATE the contents of the paper sack, as the final horrifying surprise ending. All of this was probably inspired by a Chinese folktale in which a woman discovers the headless corpse of her husband lying in bed. Also, David Lynch once used the expression "body without a head," and it has always stuck with me. So this novel is like a corpse found without the head.

So I am with this teacher, and we are both confined to the Special Ed room. Now, you know how this goes:
two people in a human bird cage
(and man, I mean a literal fucking cage: walls and floor are bendable metal slats with a tarp or rug covering them),

and somehow or other we get tasked with motivating a
blonde boy

with a bad speech impediment.

Teenage punk talks like he has a mouth full of rocks,
or is part cave man,
or some damn thing.

But there is a second room, off from the first, and this
is where they keep the real retardates:

drooling hydrocephalics

in wheelchairs,

and the deformed,

and Down Syndrome cases

what got no more than an ability to flap their arms
like a penguin and howl.

But, our room, our domain, is just for BAD KIDS.

I guess I was a bad kid that year.

Many years after, also, most probably.

But somehow or other I got on the good side of the law,
and they let me have a little responsibility,
like I am some sort of shining light, right?

An example for the ages.

An example for all the other BAD KIDS.

We go in the second room,
walking carefully over those flimsy metal slats,
and right away I smell that pissy odor which clings to
everything
so funky and nasty,

everything having to do with the mentally handicapped
(the politically correct will call me a bigot, but I bet
their sweet aunt's fannies they've never been subjected
to such a smell in all their born days),
and I know where I'm at.

There is a bed sits in the center of the floor, and
reclining on it, covers pulled up to his chin,
is Our Boy.

He has a bad blonde cut, and a heavy jaw, and his clothes
come straight from Goodwill, but at least he's wearing
some.

The woman teacher says to him, pointing an ac-
cusing finger:

—Get up. Get on up ! You belong next door. Not
in here. This is for the Special Needs kids.

He mumbles something
in a hollow, weird voice
that I can't quite make out.
But he is smiling.

He knows we're powerless to do anything to move him,
and he looks pretty comfortable,
if not entirely clean.

I don't know what to say.

I put my hands on my hips.

Then I realize something funny.

The bed he is resting on is made of those same
damnable metal bars, and looks pretty damn uncom-

fortable.

I can hear it groan and creak
and crush under his weight
as he turns over.

He peeps an eye at us mischievously,
and then screws both lids shut again,
as if he is trying hard to get back
to whatever dismal little dream he was having
before we so rudely interrupted.

I think maybe he is dreaming about how much fun he is
having

getting over on

The System.

The System

The System likes me,
so it was with an amount of aplomb that I was chosen
to meet the President,
who was an amiable old B-movie actor that played opposite a chimpanzee.

This was long ago,
and the man has passed on to greener pastures.

But I got to go to the White House screening room,
where a famous director with connections to the CIA
showed his most popular film.

It was a blockbuster about kids and an alien stranded
on Earth.

I couldn't remember exactly how the thing went or ended,
and,

as I sat there amid the rows of suits and the high,
cloying stink of aftershave,

I realized that it was because, for some reason,
they had changed the ending.

Now, about halfway through,
it became an entirely different movie.

Now, instead of the bicycle ride in the sky,
accompanied by squat green alien in a basket,
the kids were flying Black Hawk helicopters

(maybe the President liked this version of events better?),

and calling each other funny nicknames over the radio. Names that had to do with different varieties of fruit, I think.

(I can't remember specifically.)

I wondered where in the hell those kids learned to fly those helicopters.

And we never did get to see the alien.

I so badly wanted to see the alien.

But we just saw a bunch of helicopters flying over canyons, and I started to fall asleep,

and the President was standing there nudging me, calling me little fella,

and the famous director

(who was a Jewish guy with a beard and a baseball cap)

was standing there beaming with kindly eyes,

but the President looked a little scary.

(He had a bad shave, I can remember.)

He had a cruel, inscrutable face,

face of a robot, a mechanical sort of smile that said,

—Don't come to me with your petty concerns and trivialities. I could blow up the world twenty times if I wanted to. You think I am interested in your outmoded politics? I am not interested at all.

He held up a hand.

He had four fingers.

Was missing a thumb.

—You know, there aren't four people in this room who know how true that movie really is.

The director smiled, laughed a little, looked nervous.

I fidgeted in my seat.

Men in suits with black sunglasses changed positions.

Outside, Washington slept the sleep of the righteous.

I was flown back home.

My home town took pictures of me,
had a parade,
and I ended up getting my name in the paper.
But it all went terribly wrong somehow.

I knew there was more to this alien business than
what the President was letting on.
And the director of the movie must have been in on it,
too, because,
just then,
the aliens started to invade my life,
little by little.

The Dog

Okay, so we didn't have a dog.
I couldn't figure out where the hell the dog had come from,
but one day I wake up,
and there the little bitch is.

Outside,
storm clouds are gathering,
and I get out of bed,
go downstairs,
and Mom is sitting in her broken recliner,
watching the weather map.
It looks like there is a hurricane on the way.
She looks pretty scared,
and I look down to realize that that isn't a dog
I've been trailing across
the living room floor,
it's a cat.

A sleek little pussy.
She reclines on her side.

—You guys don't love me anymore.

She purrs.

I bend over, reach my hand out, stroke the soft fur.

—Oh we sure do love you, Mrs. Pussycat. We love you like a member of our own little family.

—Oh no you don't, you big liar!

You guys are planning on getting rid of me.
The cat had a whiny,
little bitch voice.
I wasn't at all shocked she should be so petulant.
Outside, the wind began to grow to an enormous howl,
and the lights flickered.

I then saw that the cat's fur was turning red. Bright
red.

The lights dimmed as the hurricane-force gale picked
up,
and Mom jumped from her seat,
but the cat was already clawing at my head,
and enveloping me with her cat womanhood.
Her pussy's pussy.
I had an instantaneous image of being born,
a whole man,
from the red, gaping cunt of a large,
red-headed woman with pale skin.
Had the cat metamorphosed,
like Gregor Samsa,
into a redheaded harlot floating in an indeterminate
space?

But I was born from the cat's vagina. Or reborn.
Or some damn thing. Later, I went back to the library,
possibly to research cats and their peculiar birth canals.

The Library

I had been here previously, looking for a lost edition of Steinbeck.

The librarian pointed out to me that they had an obscure work by Victor Hugo that demanded I read it.

The text was in little columns.
Right side up and upside down.
I couldn't make heads or tails of it.
Luckily, a re-enactor was there to make some sense of it.

Or to show a movie,
or to pick apart my brain as I settled into a hard plastic seat and listened to him.

He was dressed in Medieval robes,
a tin crown,
and his hair covered his face.

—Crossing oneself is NOT a sure way to expiate sin. Nor is saying the Hail Mary or Our Father.

(I had no idea what he was talking about.)
Next to him, a television screen showed the image of a hunchback racing through the streets of Paris,
trying desperately to save,
in the nick of time,
some doomed Esmeralda who was tied to the stake amidst a pile of ash. Below her, someone had set up a cannon aimed at her face.

(It fires, but some sort of reverse magnetism must

have been at work, because the shot is deflected and falls back to Earth. I wonder, as I sit there watching this absurdity, why it was that Pierre ran away with the goat, right when he knew that Esmeralda needed him the most, and whether or not the Sachette ever had a chance to brush her teeth while she languished in that public dungeon.)

Perhaps Pierre, too, was reborn from an animal's womb.

Perhaps we should all crawl back into the skin of some shape-shifting dog or kitten,
or goat,
and experience the world from the inside out,
as we travel,
screaming,
through the darkened tunnel of delirium into the bright,
brutal pain of the New Day.
(Howling with Roman intensity.)

(The Workings of) The Federal Reserve

I sped along the hallways looking daft,
left and right,
suckers everywhere.

Down below, in the cage of rooms I had just left,
a collection
(a gaggle if you will)
of Roman boys
in togas sat around.

I am tasked with explaining the workings of the Federal Reserve to this lot.

(Glare of the television painting faces blue and white, and the girl says, —I think you broke it, ‘cause the cat won’t drink out of it anymore.)

—So I’m sucking the water out of this plastic gun, and we are all just sitting there. And I start to take the thing apart, and realize that I don’t know how the hell it works. And why am I sucking on some kind of plastic pump anyway, so nasty? But we had all better go, I reflect, before her boyfriend gets home, and he has his buddies with him, and then someone (likely me) will be dragged out onto the lawn. You know how this routine works: angry ham hock fists and burning skull beneath layers of fat; chin wobbling, arms thrusting back and forth and screams dying in the distance

As Patrol Car Creeps On

—Oh, lookee see, cried the cop.

—Better stop them while he's still alive.

So I don't want to get stomped.

The boyfriend and esteemed ex-con has figured prominently in our interactions as of late.

(our interpersonal relationship consists of hot little fuck fantasies and dirty, smeared lipstick...)

So it wasn't long ago I was walking down some hot side-
walk,
and she is behind me with a gaggle of witches,
and they all start chanting out my name
in nursery rhyme
Jump rope speak,
and I know I'm going to be captured by this coven.
It is hot and bright and sticky
and your armpits and thighs are sore,
and some fat kid has spilled ice cream
drips on the cracked sidewalk.
But here I am,
they've whisked me away,
and we're all suddenly in a hotel room.
I'm thinking orgy.

The Tigers

There are seven tigers residing in my apartment.

I'm living with my aunt.

She adopted them as little tiger cubs.

It didn't take them long to grow though,

and they are now mammoth creatures that need to be
fed massive amounts of meat every day,

just to keep them sated.

They seem docile, tame,

as if they appreciate the good situation they've got going
here.

They loll around all day,

all over the furniture,

their tails thumping against the coffee table.

And I live in terror.

(Terror because I know that, one day, the Beast
Will Out, and these tigers will fall on me, and devour
me. And would my aunt care? I'm not certain. She loves
these animals as if they were her own children. Hell, she
raised them from little cubs. She feeds them out of her
hand. Besides, she sleeps all day, and can't be bothered
about her pets.)

So the tigers loll about with rusty purrs and twitching
tails,

and I'm afraid to sit next to them,
or step on their claws.

One false move,
after all,
and I'm toast.

Dead meat.
Hamburger.
A bloody mess.
That would be the end of Null.

Our living room is a lazy oasis for tigers.
They come in one size:
very large and intimidating.
What's worse,
it is I who gets to feed them.
Mostly from old Alpo cans.
But what they want is MEAT,
(and we can't really afford the good stuff.)
I get nervous; they are starting to look lean and hungry.

Now the management of our building hasn't said
anything about the tigers loping casually through the
rooms as they come and inspect for bugs, (which is reg-
ular because bugs seem to be as endemic around here as
tigers).

Bent down at the sink,
the Bug Man
is looking for roaches.

I've seen a few.

They don't, however, disturb me as much as the tigers do.

—This situation can't go on like this forever

I tell her.

She rolls over in bed,

gets up,

wipes her eyes,

says,

—I know. But they are really quite tame, don't you think?

Nothing to be afraid of. See? He's as gentle as a kitchen.

I think she meant to say kitten,

but I let it go.

A great, slow, loping tiger moves,

with killing grace,

through the door,

and jumps up into bed next to her.

She runs her fingers through the thick fur,

and the thing emits a treacherous, rusty growl.

I shrink back.

These Tigers Will Be the Death of Me

When I called the policeman,
he came in and took stock of the situation immediately.
—Look, lady,
he tells my aunt,
—We have laws in this state, see? You can't just go keeping seven tigers in your house. Not in an apartment this size. It isn't kosher.

She sits up in bed,
eyes the policeman warily,
and asks him what she's supposed to do.
Where, after all, will they go,
if she has to get rid of them?

—That's not my problem, lady. I'm giving you one month. If, when I come back, these tigers are still here, you're going to be in trouble. A lot of trouble. Understand?

She nodded.
I went outdoors,
not feeling very well for having called the law on my aunt.
Outside,
there was a regular convention of apartment complex tenants going on. Someone was restraining a huge black cat with an arched back,
that I at first took to be a dog.

(Maybe a vicious pit bull.)
But it was obviously a cat.
What were they all doing out here,
these milling throngs of people?

 Suddenly a man steps forward with a gold club.
He has on a funny checkered cap,
and a sort of flight jacket that is a really garish purple.
He starts chipping at these golf balls.
I make this is some kind of impromptu tournament.

Parsecs in Oblivion

The man turns to me,
his eyes glowing like twin coals, and says,
—Null, it's time to go.

I step off the platform.
Everything is so white here; in this place the walls seem
to glow from within,
casting their light outward so that shadow people can't
lurk in the corners of the room.

There are no crawling shadows here,
no dark and ready nightmares creeping about on twisted
feet to haunt the darkness,
because there is no darkness.

Even the clothing is shimmering and white,
radiant with the love and peace I feel all around me,
and I say,
—I don't want to go,
but he just smiles,
and his face is a vast plain of understanding and some-
where,
written into the pattern of the stars,
I know that all things are meant to be.

—The Knowing Self is not born; it never dies. It
sprang from nothing, nothing sprang from it.

His mouth makes the words,
but I hear them like an echo in my head,
rumbling around with a mythic resonance until they
penetrate the core of my brain,
and I hang my head in submission and realize that,
yes,
I will have to transport down,
despite the good time I am having here,
amidst the rainbow light that shines and shines and
comes from everywhere and nowhere.
So I take on a new physical form,
and then I am lead to that shifting screen wherein vi-
sions pop in and out of your mind like glowing fire-
works,
and laser lights penetrate your eyes,
and you can peer into the darkness of secret spaces and
nothing can hurt you because you are surrounded by the
good vibrations emitted

...by the humming and thrilling of the mother ship as
it counts off parsecs in intergalactic oblivion.

The Prey

The Wolf prowled the streets in darkness,
looking for his prey.
She was walking to a convenience store to buy a pop.
The streets were deserted,
the parking lot a ghost town of rusted shit cars and dead
bugs,
candy wrappers and old bottles tossed aside;
so much refuse.
But there was something fundamentally wrong here.
There was some sort of center of psychic gravity,
some dimensional whirlpool that puked up the sullen
denizens of another reality,

In All Their Strange and Gruesome Savoir Faire

As in one time I saw a man with funny legs,
walking like a drunken flying saucer captain...
Now, one should never tease the crippled,
but I wasn't sure that that was what he even was as I
stood at the checkout of the supermarket line
(which was right next door to the convenience store),
and he came crab-walking up the aisle,
holding a single yellow flower out in front of him like it
was a sacred chalice; and he was a skinny,
sweaty,
oily white man,
who was tall and gangly but had legs like a crab,
and a sort of plaid shirt and shorts,
and he was wearing the thickest glasses I have ever seen,
with tape on them.
And he had a shock of hair more like an afro.
And heavy breathing:
you could hear him coming up the aisle,
gasping as if he were having a really bad asthma attack.
But no attack.
This must have been normal for him.

The sight of him shocked me
(but not as much as other things would shock me in due
time),
and I inched away from him as he crab-walked to the

register with his single flower and purchased it.
What did he want with one lousy flower?
To take it back to his home planet?

(So that area of town acts as some sort of sinister magnet, attracting in things BEST LEFT UNKNOWN to the prying eyes of mortal man. But it is a dull, dry, empty little shopping center on the edge of a long country road, leading away from a college.)

When he killed the girl,
it was a real freak scene.
Had driven up next to her in his van,
and had eyed her with that wolfish,
knowing look.
He was a Wolf,
alright,

and she was a Rabbit, and it was dark and the moon was
howling and his blood was up.
Rabbit was tasty and good.
Rabbit was good meat.
He felt his heart skip a beat.

—Hey baby? Hey, bitch, I'm talkin' to you.

The girl continued to walk,
her blood pressure increasing; sudden panic erupted in
white hot spots of terror across her face,

blotches of icy blood rushing to her cheeks.

Her hair whipped about in the gentle breeze as she quickened her pace.

—Hey, you want a ride?

It was a lame growl for a wolf of his caliber,
but it was the best his lust-addled mind could conjure.

He drove slowly,
pacing her,
she taking off across a field between a swimming pool
and a park.

Suddenly the beast leapt up in his soul,
the Wolf released itself,
and was suddenly hairy and growling and leaping and
running after the kill.

The Kill.

All that mattered to the animal.

He chased after her,
cornered her against a wall,
pinned her against a tree.
He could hear her heart hammer in her chest,
as her breath sucked in...out...in...out...
Was she consciously trying to control her panic?

He wasn't sure.

She suddenly screamed,
and he dealt her a crushing blow.

—Don't do that again,
he said calmly,
producing a buck knife.

—Now, take off your clothes.

She started to unbutton her shirt.

The Wolf felt himself go rigid with excitement and lust.

He was nearly salivating.

It would all be over so soon,

but, oh, it would be so sweet to the Wolf.

He could barely see her in the moonlight.

Small.

Waif-like,

almost.

A good girl.

Mommy's little angel.

Daddy's little darling.

She stood, like a shock-trauma victim,

bathed silver in the coursing moonlight.

The cicadas sang

a pretty song.

The night was a rumbling

fart of cars

plunging

to various destinations

in the distance.

Somewhere He Fancied He Could Hear the Chatter
From a Radio.

She stood in confusion,
her arms held stiffly out in bleak repose,
as if to say,
—This is what you wanted. This is what you wanted to
see? Can you be satisfied now? Can you let me go, and
let me live? Oh, I so badly want to live, and to love, and
to grow old, and to see the other wabbits again, all snug
and comfortable in our little cage.

Her eyes were twin moons of exquisite religious suffer-
ing.

Somewhere he knew
angels were weeping
tears of blood.

He couldn't kill her here.
He had to find another location.
It was too early,
there wasn't enough time,
someone might happen upon them in the darkness.
It excited him though,
the possibility of capture—
It thrilled him almost as much as the hunt and capture
of the prey.

The strange suspended animation they both stood in was broken by one swift movement of his dirty hand. He brought it down with crushing force against the side of her head, knocking her unconscious.

He dragged her back to the van.
How he did this without anyone seeing him,
across a lighted road so early in the evening,
is anyone's guess.

He managed.
He left the clothes behind,
(Later, the police would find them, but that was all.)

No blood.

No DNA.

No fingerprints.

A perfect kill.

The Wolf was pleased with his swift cunning.

He wrapped her up in a plastic tarp,
stuffed her in the back of his van amidst the filth and
the shit,

the porno mags and the dirty underwear,
and the whatnots and candy wrappers and potato chip
bags.

The Wolf had a big appetite.

He drove down the road a pace,
but he turned off onto the back roads,
which he knew well.

He was looking for a specific isolated spot,
somewhere far out,

where he could work unhampered and undiscovered for as long as it would take.

He found his spot amidst a stand of thick trees, overlooking a river.

We could say the spot was romantic,
but we would be lying.

(Of course, a special relationship must exist,
after a fashion,

between the Predator and his Prey.
A certain dance of death is enacted,
a ritual performed,
a life spent.)

He dragged her out of the van.
She was coming to.

He leaned her against a tree as she moved groggily in the chill night air. She made a moaning sound in her throat. He crouched down for a moment, to hear if she might say something.

She never spoke a word he could understand.
He knocked her back against the rough bark,
pinned her there with one hand,
and got out his belt.

It was a long strip of leather he kept for just such purposes.

He began to wind it around her neck,
around the slim tree trunk,
tightening it,
leaning back against it,

as her hands shot up to her throat.
She struggled,
but her eyes told him she knew the game was up.
There was a certain resignation that only he could see;
it was a dead, vapid light in the eye,
one that said that Heaven's gate would soon be opening
to claim another soul.

Finally it was all over.
He released his grip on the belt,
the blood coursing in his veins,
his sex sliding down his leg in a hot stream.
He gasped,
shuddered,
felt the incredible ecstasy,
wondered what it would be like to eat the body,
to keep it with you forever in a sense,
and then thought that that was impossible.
He wasn't, after all, Jeffrey Dahmer.

He dumped her.
He never told the police where.
she has never been seen again.

Tough World

Someone's father reminds him,
holding out an old rifle and dressed in green fatigues,
that the military wants his service.
The son doesn't want to go,
wants to wrestle the father to the ground to prove,
once and for all,
that he isn't going to take any shit and didn't steal the
clip of money that was lying on grandma's table
(grandma at this point, is not dead in her grave, I suppose,
but still alive, and gathered with the family, and
pointing an accusing finger at our young hero.)

—You want to know who manufactured the best
airplanes during the war? The Americans, of course. We
did. That's why we beat the Germans. The Nazis.

The father sits down, crosses his legs, looks reflective.

Somewhere,
the boy remembers better times.

He is With His Mother in a Fantasy of the Movies

They are watching an old black-and-white flick on the screen.

It apparently stars Danny Kaye.

The mother is morbidly obese.

The boy knows that,

just as sure as his father will one day drop dead from stress,

so too will his mother succumb to a heart attack because of her obesity. She tells him,

—Go up to the snack bar and get me some french fries.

He does what he is told,

a dutiful son.

(Of course, I see all this through the shifting prism of the viewer, and it is all like little images suddenly grown big from multicolored prisms and shining jewels, and little lasers that blast strange, warped sounds that shatter the nerves and the ears. And suddenly, I realize I am beaming down with the Away Team.)

They are all teachers—

WE are all teachers, I should say.

But the kids think we are some kind of hunchbacked, fairy tale goblins,

or at least,

as frequency fields shift,

they catch a glimpse of something like that.

A hook-nosed, wart-encrusted little troll with long,
skinny fingers,
who terrifies little chillins,
and most likely,
eats rabbits.

(Wabbits),

I forgot.

But we have a job to do,
and the Head Teacher takes us over to the Wabbit cage,
and it is a pen with a few sick bunnies in it,
losing their fur in clumps.

And I can see why; it's filthy.

—Hasn't been cleaned in awhile,
said the Head Teacher.

—If the rabbits start to die we cart them away.

—Turn them into meat glue.

—You mean, they are eaten?

—Everything in nature is, eventually
said the Head Teacher,
and turned to walk away.

I didn't ask her what she meant by this,
but went to work.

At first,
I thought that someone had left a hose running,
because the ground was a quagmire of pure sludge.
The heavy posts holding up the cage were sinking into
the mire,
and my feet were also sinking.

I opened up the cage with trembling hands.

Inside,
a dying bunny lay on its side,
its little bunny ass bare of fur,
and it looked sick as all hell,
and I tried to scoop handfuls of bunny shit out of the
cage,
but the mud and filth surrounding it were making it
impossible.

Flies began to dot to and fro on my face,
and rivulets of sweat poured down my cheeks.

I could feel myself drowning in swampy stink.

In my back pocket was a copy of the *Necronomicon*.
I don't remember when I was given this or why,
but sure enough, it was there. Piss-elegant and black,
with a weird sigil on the front cover.

I, at least, had heavy gloves on. My buddy came
over to me.

—How ya doing?

—Not so good, I said.

—And this is gonna get ruined if I'm not careful.

I tossed the book up to him.

The laughter of little children screeched like a cacophonous
music around me,

as the silent breeze blew stink up my nostrils.

More handfuls of bunny shit.

A corpse.

Another dead bunny.

Everything in nature is eaten, eventually.

The Red Death Held Sway Over All.

I shoveled bunny shit.
Years ago,
I had dreamt the Wolf.
I had seen him,
big as life,
pulling my underage ass off a bicycle and stuffing me
in the trunk of a car.
I had shot up from bed screaming,
the image of being entombed in an automobile trunk
still lingering in my nightmare consciousness.
I had seen that mountainous frame,
that stone-hardened visage,
the scrubby chin...

Years later I would see the same face in the news-
paper,
on the internet,
in sleazy true-crime paperbacks:
The eyes are always cold flint,
the jaw set firm,
the soul given over to Satan and the way of all flesh.

Did her face freeze in terror,
like some snapshot of a tortured goddess,
in the pale moments before she knew the agony of her
own death?

Did the both of them form a macabre ballet,
a lover's tryst of absurd and gothic proportions,
as his huge hands wrapped leather garrote around her
throat like a ribbon of killing beauty?

Did Mary Kelly know the precise geometric angles that
her own corpse would come to repose in,
moments after Jack the Ripper had left her a butchered
rag?

Are such mathematics quantified by God,
or is the Law of the Universe one of random chance,
blood spattering where it may,
flesh and grue falling,
without care or toil,
through empty shadows of meaningless time?
Or is this all just bullshit?

I don't know.

Around me,
children scream.
The Wolf is a character in a fairy tale.
I shovel rabbit shit on the deck of the intergalactic freighter
EDX.
It's safer up here,
and much more sane.
THEY
...are vegetarians.

That Stone-Hardened Visage, the Scrubby Chin

It was in group therapy that I encountered the Cadaver Man.

He was a portly little man
(although taller than me),
and he had short, blonde hair parted in the middle,
a large grin,
and a bad complexion.

I remember he was wearing a leather jacket,

a heavy metal T-shirt, rumpled jeans, bad sneakers, and
two bracelets.

He didn't look like he worked in the funeral industry;
he looked like he might be a manager at McDonalds.

But sure enough,
as soon as group ended,
he started in on details.

(One interesting example of synchronicity just occurred. Just as I got done typing the name — McDonald's, the man being interviewed on the radio program I am listening to, mentioned McDonald's. Not only that, but he mentioned that McDonald's food is very bad for you, and can give you a heart attack. Of course, I'm writing about someone that worked in the funeral industry.)

He sat back in his chair,
smiled,
and I could feel icy tendrils of creepiness float over my
skin.

He had bad teeth.

—My job was to pick them up after they died. Now, most people think that after you die, you're some kind of clean little thing...no. You're a stinking, filthy mess. Some of these old people were hoarders, too. Oh man, you'd go into a place, and it's just piles and piles of trash everywhere, and you have to pick your way through the garbage just to try and find 'em. And then, the stink.

—I remember carrying this one old bag down the stairs. Her daughter had called and she had died in her own bed, at home, which I guess must be the best way. But I was carrying her down the stairs, and she starts leaking this shit...Get it all over my shoulder, man. Now, that would gross most people out, I know. But you're in this business long enough, you get used to it.

He looked around as if to see if invisible people were listening to him.

There was a fat lady left sitting in a chair, talking to another woman who was missing teeth, and was wearing a mental hospital gown over her blouse and jeans.

Both were drinking coffee out of little Styrofoam cups. Neither of them seemed to be paying any attention to us.

The room smelled like cherry lozenges; I have no idea what Cadaver Man smelled like.

I didn't want to get that close to him.

—You know, I heard a story about some old guy

died in his house. They didn't find him for days. And it was damn hot. All his windows were closed. No ventilation. It must have been sweltering in there. They say he exploded—like, literally fucking exploded, man. They say there were swarms of flies, just covering the windows. The smell must have been, ah, I can imagine...Jesus.

I don't know how to respond.

I once owned a book of homicide photos from the old days,

a book called *Death Scenes*,

so I had seen scenes similar to what he had just described.

But I had never smelled death,

and it was here that he felt the need to get really descriptive.

—You know, death has a peculiar scent to it, all its own.

—Like shit?

I asked.

—No, no, not like shit. Much, much worse. But different. I don't know. I don't know how to describe it. There was this one woman, when I was working at this nursing home, and she had died, and man...the whole fucking hallway just reeked, man. It was incredible. I mean, she must have started rotting or something before she even died.

—People were getting sick?

He shook his head,
said,
—Oh man, people were gagging and puking, and I swear
the paint peeled back from the walls. Jesus, I never smelled
anything like that before in my life. Man, that was the
worst one. Death has a smell uniquely its own.

He sat back and sighed.
The skinny little counselor came back in the room and
told us that the lunch cart was here.
We had heard it rattle in from the elevator.
I wasn't feeling particularly hungry.

—Man, said Cadaver Man,
—am I hungry. Jeez, I hope they brought us something
good. They about starve you around here.

He started to get up,
sighed again,
put his hands on the arm rests of his seat,
started to rise,
and then sank back down.
He seemed to need a lot of time to get moving.

—You know, a lot of people think that just because
you work in the funeral industry, you're a mortician and
you embalm bodies and they think that makes you some
kind of gloomy Gus. Not true. Not true at all. I like to
party and cut-up and joke around as much as the next
guy.

—Lotta joking around back there in the prep room?

—Oh man! You bet your ass. It's a real riot some-

times. Man, you'd think you were at a big party some days. I mean, shit, we order pizza, drink beer, watch TV shows just like everybody else, man. Just like everybody else. And I'll tell you what: one of the funniest motherfuckers I ever knew was a funeral director. Man, he would come in some mornings, and he would be so stoned...eyes just like little pinpricks. I use to smoke with him.

I asked him,
by the way,
what he was doing here.

He smiled.

—Painkillers.

—Painkillers?

He looked down at his feet, grinned, said,
—Oh yeah, I love painkillers.

Later,
after we had grubbed down the chow they had brought up,
visitors started coming in slowly,
and there were a few kids puttering around.
I was sitting at a scratched-up little table talking to my mother when they brought a new admission in.

It was a tall, skinny scarecrow of a man,
with a scruffy red beard and curly,
unkempt,
dirty hair.

He was wearing an old flannel shirt that hung off his

skinny frame like old rags.

He looked around him.
His jaw began to work,
and he got a panicked look in his eyes.

I won't pretend I can recall exactly what he said,
but his sharp jaw began to work,
and a torrent of gibberish and profanity erupted from
his mouth.

His skinny arms began to shake; he looked like he was
building up to an eruption.

Right away, some mental health worker
(a squat woman in pink and white)
comes up beside him and tries to calm him down,
but you can see she's nervous.
A male orderly starts to circle apprehensively,
and I realize that a quite ugly scene might develop here,
with all the visitors and kids running around.

But nothing happens,
and they shoot him full of drugs.
He sleeps like the dead for three days.
Cadaver Man comes back on an outpatient basis.
I spend two weeks gumming crackers and eating hospi-
tal food,
and wondering how it is I seem to find myself in these
situations.

(We were auditioning circus acts, and a veritable cavalcade of freaks with gaily-colored forms moved through the door, appendages sticking out of various places odd and sundry.)

You Dig That This Was the Television Gimmick, and
I Told the Woman

—Look, we got to have something new,
something fresh,
something that the people will go mad for!
and it was just then that SHE came floating through the
door,
feet barely seeming to touch the Earth,
and I wondered how a body like that could defy gravity.
She was fat,
oh immensely fat,
and I was worried for a minute that she might bounce
on over and sit on my lap.
I put my arms out to stop her,
fearing that my elbows would be crushed,
but she had no such intention.

My assistant looked mildly amused,
even startled.
This girl was Chinese,
and wore a low-cut top that showed a tattoo of a dragon
across the top of her not inconsiderable breasts.

If she hadn't been fat,
she might have been beautiful.
As it was she glided along with a grace we could hardly
give her credit for,
or even believe.

—What's the act?

—What?

She looked at me as if she didn't understand English
real well.

—Oh, you mean what do I do? I float.

—You float?

I said,
incredulously leaning back in my chair.
My assistant made a sound in her throat I found repul-
sive,
like snuffling mucus into a ball of tiny laughter.

—Sure. I just have to take my pills. Look, you have
a window right over there. Must be twenty stories up. I'll
just lean out the window, float out on my back—as long
as my heels don't leave the window sill I should be fine.
In a few moments, I'll be completely covered in ice.

I didn't get the part about ice,
and I sure didn't want her falling to her death,
but I figured,
eh, it's some sort of illusionist trick,
so I let her go.
She went to the window,
opened it up,

looked out at the city as it breathed like a hungry lion
in the cold,

biting wind of December.

Then she turned around,

asked for a glass of water,

and swallowed a handful of little yellow caplets.

She then turned around,

leaned far back until her body was at an unbelievable
arch,

and dropped out into the empty air.

To my amazement she floated, stiff as a board.

My assistant and I crept to the window,

looked out at the gentle rolls of fat blowing in the breeze,

almost put out a hand to touch her

and then thought better of it.

What if we caused her to fall?

It was a long way down to the sidewalk,

and she would make a heavy, nasty splat.

She seemed to be in some sort of a trance.

Then, she began to twitch; her feet began to jerk invol-
untarily,

and you could feel the heat rise from her body.

We backed away,

convinced we were witnessing a miracle.

Below, we could hear the sound of the cars zoom-
ing by in the street, their horns blaring.

Up here, there was a girl floating in mid-air out the win-
dow,

moaning in ecstasy,
as a blanket of cold seemed to descend around her suddenly, I noticed her skin grow icy.

She was turning blue.

She's Fucking the Cop Dig?

Or, he is raping her,
one or the other.

We stand at the back window with our mouths hanging
open,

low smiles playing on our lips.

I still have drugs in my sock.

I realize it is going to be a long night.

—Are they fucking?

I ask.

I could plainly see that the Man in Black was hump-
ing her righteously, and she must have been enjoying it
because there was no struggle.

We had been moving across the alley toward a parking
lot,

and the drugs were in my sock.

Like, why did I have to carry 'em?

But I guess that's the way it goes when you're young and
in love.

Me and the Tall Boy decided to make a run for it.
Hell,

the cop might not even be human.

He got out of his cruiser,

and we were standing there about to piss our pants,

and he reels around like he is drunk and can barely
breathe. Maybe he is one of the Men in Black.

I have read John Keel.

I have read *The Mothman Prophecies*,
And *Operation: Trojan*,
And *The Eight Tower*,
and *Our Haunted Planet*,
and *Disneyland of the Gods*.

They were all righteous books.

I could dig that the Men in Black and other flying saucer
creeps are said to stumble around like drunks and be
unable to breathe Earth air easily.

Not human.

That was it.

This cop was a fucking flying saucer creep.

Sky Maiden

(She began to be covered in chips of ice.)
I thought perhaps she was dying.
It accumulated across her body until,
after what seemed like only a few moments,
she was a floating block of solid ice,
suspended out the window in mid air.
I knew we had a real winner here.
This was our ticket to the big time.
(“Most distasteful routine I ever stand still for!”)

Bub Was Plugging His Wife from Hell to Breakfast

having just returned home from a hunting trip in the Alleghenies one summer evening in October of 1896.

Out of the clear blue,

they could hear a weird,

warbling, whining whistle come

—like knobby tires on a wet pavement, streaking out from overhead. They moaned and groaned and huffed and puffed,

but they stopped because,

out of the window,

they could see something streak out of the sky.

—Tar nation! cried Bub.

—I think it's one of them thar meteors, Ma!

—Well, I'll declare, cried Bub's wife,

It sure as shit picked a good time to come along and interrupt us!

They heard a tremendous crash through the trees, and saw a bright orange glow that they greatly feared was fire.

Bub got his overalls back up and buttoned,

and the missus went to fetch a pail of water.

They both headed out the front door onto the porch, across the yard and into the nearby woods.

There were tree branches broken and flattened, burned grass,

and Bub could plainly see that something heavy had

come down close by.

Then he smelled the smoke,

and following his nose,

lead the wife straight down an old path through the trees, finally coming upon the smoking crater that had been punched into the ground from above.

Bub cautiously scooted to the side of the crater, his eyes watering from the smoke and stink.

Below, he could see a great round stone, glowing orange from heat and intense light, and he could hear a weird hissing.

—Oh my gracious sakes alive, Ma! It sure as shit's a meteor alright. And landed right smack dab on our property, too. Say, wonder what they'd pay for it up at the college?

Ma was less than thrilled with the find.

—Lord don't it ever stink! Like tar and sulfur and hogshit all rolled up into one.

they both could hear a weird sort of banging and clanging,
like metal being moved around and scraped along a floor. Then, to their amazement, a door blew open in the side of the thing! They ran back from the edge of the crater, their hands over their mouths
(and Ma's other hand over her eyes),
and, below them, a weird figure covered in hair seemed to emerge from the doorway in the meteor.

He looked like a gorilla with red eyes.

He was a little fellow with long arms and fingers,
staggering a bit.

Otherwise, he was the very spitting image of a hairy ape
man.

Bub wished badly that he had brought his gun with
him,

but hadn't thought he would need it.

(After all, why would you need to shoot a meteor?)

Instead of running, though, the two of them stood stock-
still in amazement as the strange creature

(Bub just KNEW it was a bonafide Martian)

climbed up out of the pit with its hairy claws,

stood swaying on its feet as if it had just drunk a gallon
of sour mash, uttered a strange word,

grabbed its throat,

and keeled over dead.

Bub and his wife just stood there in amazement.

—It's a Martian, Ma! I'll be hogtied and dipped in
gopher shit if that ain't a bonafide, honest-to-goodness,
dad-blamed man from Mars!

Ma sighed.

She wiped her hands on her aprons,

and crept toward the body,

which already seemed to be turning a weird, ashy grey.

—Yeah, but what good is he now? He's dead.

Bub was too excited to be put down.

—Still good, Ma! Still good! Why, a fella would
pay a pretty penny to get his first glimpse of a Martian,

dead or alive. C'mon, help me get him to the house. We'll pickle him in an old barrel and sell him to the highest bidder!

He wasn't hard to carry between them.
As a matter of fact, he was damn light.
They took him back to the cabin,
laid him out on an old bunk,
and Bub went to fetch a barrel and some moonshine
(to preserve the body),
while Ma went to fetch dinner.
(Carrying dead Martians around, she observed, made a
body hungry.)

Ma wasn't the only one thinking of dinner, however.

That old dog Samson hadn't been fed yet that day, and he was mighty hungry.

He went rustling around in the yard for scraps,
but found he was coming up bare.

In time, he was joined by another neighborhood cur,
and then another. The three dogs commiserated for a
moment,

then one of them sniffed the air and said,

—Say fellas, I think I smell something over at the Johnson place, smells like chicken.

The others sniffed.

—Yankee Pot Roast, said Samson.

—Rabbit stew, said the third cur.

The three of them crept to the door of the Johnson cabin.

Ma was at the cook stove slaving away, not paying a bit of attention. The three dogs skittered across the floor to the old bunk, where the Martian was laid out in quiet repose.

They sniffed at him.

They decided that, indeed, he did smell like chicken.

They suddenly fell upon the corpse! devouring it like it was a rare, wonderful piece of meat.

Ma turned from the cook stove, put her hands to her head, and cried out, just as Bub came through the door, hefting an old barrel of moonshine.

He dropped it, went for his gun, cried,

—God damned dogs! I'll teach you to ruin a perfectly good Martian!

The Rat Man

So I followed the old man out to the place,
and right away I make that these people are filthy:
dirt everywhere,
piled up bags of garbage,
roof caving in,
yard run-to-riot with overgrown grass and old junk cars
on cinderblocks, and shitty diapers and beer bottles.
The old man went outside for better cell phone recep-
tion,
which left me inside talking to the slack-jaws and the
other dysgenic shits in the family.

—Hey, you want to see some dirty pictures?

Nobody had ever asked me before,
so he pulls out this crusty,
folded-over old slick porno mag,
and hands it over,
and right away I feel like my hands are oozing grease
and I wonder about bacteria.
Now, I am no germophobe or anything,
but these people were the dirtiest mothers I had ever
come across.

The magazine was boring:
some girl down on all fours and somebody giving her a
good, hard, slow pimp screw.

But her eyes told me she was bored.
I handed it back to him.

I sniffed.

The place smelled like dog shit, dirty laundry, old cans of paint, and spoiled cabbage.

—What are we doing here?

The boy had long, greasy blonde hair and his clothes sort of hung off him in tattered folds.

Corduroy pants, flannel shirt, filthy T-shirt with cigarette holes.

His little brother looked even worse,
like a walking pigpen,
and I wanted badly to leave.

(Somehow or other I get the feeling these degenerates are hiding something.)

Like maybe they have someone chained up in the basement.

But I don't know.

I eye the blonde kid warily while he scratches his stringy, buggy head.

I worry I'll get infected while I'm here.
God knows what with.

A carload of teenagers pulls up.

All I can make out is one girl, who gets out, and says she is looking for Tony.

Apparently Tony isn't there,
but I make she is looking to buy a nickel bag of weed,
and soon she gets back in the car,

and me and the old man follow at a discrete distance.
Maybe Tony was there,
because someone from the house is riding shotgun, and
they are headed out to an even worse, more run-down
neighborhood.

So we tail them.

I get out the camera with telephoto lens.

I almost drop it.

I can't believe what I'm seeing.

Out on the porch is an immense "rat man."

Can't describe him any other way,
except he's a human/rat hybrid of some sort.
And he's wearing an old-fashioned flight cap and a pair
of goggles.

—This area is bad, says the Old Man.

—I think we should get out of here. There's a superstition says this place is cursed, haunted by monsters.

—Bullshit, I tell him.

I snap some photos of the Rat Man.

I see he even has a vestigial tail tucked away beneath his pants.

I suddenly realize that everyone of the goddamn filthy pigs we had been talking to all day is several generations of this weird,

degenerate family line—they're all "rat people," in other words, to a greater or lesser degree.

Incest and bestiality and a family tree that never forks.

Of course,

just then,
I have a vision of a million rat snouts pushing up through
the damp earth,
as if we are under attack from a legion of degenerate,
mutant freaks who bite the heads off of human babies
and fuck their sisters.
I'm prone to such hallucinations.
I shake it off,
snap some more photos, and we drive away.

Now later we came back snooping, and we go in
back of the little dump house where the Rat Man lives,
(and we see a couple of mutants with bad teeth, football
helmets, and pockmarked, oozy skin operating some
sort of hand-cranked copy machine. We walk up nice
and slow. Both of them are half-naked in rags, and they
are both filthy. They are muscular brutes.)

—Hold it right there. Let's look at what you're
copying there.

I get 'em both standing in a dark corner with their
hands up.

They had both been giggling stupid laughter when we
walked up,

but neither one of them were laughing now.

They both looked confused and angry.

The Old Man reached over,
grabbed some of the copies,
started looking through them.

To quote *The Big Sleep*,

—They were of an indescribable filth.

Bondage stuff, mutilation, torture—crime scene photos.

The Rat Man suddenly appeared behind us,
crawling on his belly.

He was a full rat now,

and chained to him,

around his neck,

the girl that had been in the car crawled behind him on
all fours.

It was a pulp fiction horror scene.

I fired,

puked,

fired again.

Dog Eats

The mangy curs skittered across the floor haphazardly, before taking to the yard.

One of them was grazed by a round of buckshot, but escaped otherwise unscathed.

Inside,
all was havoc,
as Bub looked at the bed and raged.
The foulest language you ever heard escaped his lips,
and he bemoaned his sorry fate; that he was born, apparently, to always have bad luck in the end.

—All ruined! All ruined! All that good money down the drain! Ain't nobody gonna pay a penny for that mess of slops!

Indeed,
the Martian was now a gory,
mangled mess of entrails,
all spread across the old bunk in a haphazard fashion.
It looked like somebody had dynamited a raspberry pie filled with pig innards.

Ma,
more thoughtful than Bub,
stood there a moment as if in shock,
and then said, —Well, what about the damn meteorite itself? That landed on OUR property. Might someone not pay a pretty penny or two to have a look at that?

Suddenly Bub brightened up.

—Sure Ma! Why, that's good thinking! We'll go on down there and have another look at that meteor. Probably cooled off a great deal by now. Maybe take a couple of oxen to pull it back here! Whew! That's just the ticket!

Then suddenly Bub grew serious,
and his voice lowered, as he said, —Say, Ma, you don't reckon there's any more of them Martian fellows hiding in that there meteor,
do ya?

Perhaps I better take my gun.

—Perhaps you had better.

And with that they both left.

They walked back through the crushed grass and the
broken branches,
to the still-smoking crater,
and peered down at the large,
rock-like object in the center.

It seemed big enough for two,
maybe three people to sit in comfortably.
Cautiously, Bub climbed down the side of the crater,
carefully holding his rifle out in front of him,
while Ma followed at a respectful distance.

They came to the door in the meteor.
Bub looked inside.

The sun was setting, but, inside, he fancied he could
see what looked to be shiny knobs and controls in the
murky darkness.

He stepped through the doorway, cautiously.
Ma followed.

Suddenly the door slammed shut.

—My word, it sure is dark in here, said Bub.

The object lifted off,
shot into the sky,
and headed for worlds unknown

Sheriff Smutz clomped around the floor of the old cabin, his face contorted into a pickled grimace.

Boy, didn't the gory offal mess on that bunk stink to high heaven!

His deputy, Andy, came in from the yard.

The Sheriff put his pipe in his mouth,

turned,

lit a match,

lit the pipe,

and said,

—Need something to cover the stink. Any sign of the Johnsons?

Andy shook his head.

—No, Sheriff. Looks like they clean disappeared. But, Sheriff, looks like something weird done crashed out in the woods, out yonder, something heavy. Big. Tree branches are broken, and grass is crushed and burnt up and what not.

Sheriff Smutz considered.

He waved his hand at the gory mess drying on the old bunk. —Any idea what this stinking stuff is?

Deputy Andy shook his head, said, —Not a clue, Sherriff. But it smells just about like those three dogs I found out at the edge of the yard. Man, I've seen some mangy, sick-looking mutts in my time, but these three have to take the cake.

The Sheriff raised his eyebrows.

—Dogs?

—Sure. Three of ‘em. All look about half-starved. They’re all sick as hell, throwing up and shitting all over the place. And their shit smells like what’s on that bed. And I’ll tell you another thing, Sheriff.

—What’s that?

Andy drew close,
and his voice fell to a near-whisper,
although Sheriff Smutz couldn’t figure out exactly why.

Goat Head Albino

(The doctor comes out, stands at the podium, shuffles some papers, and readjusts the heavy glasses perched at the end of his withered blue nose.)

—Gentleman and ladies...that is, hostages to fortune, ahem, we have all gathered you here today for the express purpose of testing out certain highly dangerous mind-altering substances that the CIA has assured us are completely safe, if not entirely ethical or legal. The substances themselves, ahem, are not what strictly interest us...No, the purposes of this study are far more esoteric than just testing out a wild new hallucinogen on a bunch of unwitting volunteers...ahem. Now, where was I?

He bends over,
shuffles more papers.
Null looks over at the chisel-faced boy sitting a few rows away from him.
The boy looks as if he is bathed in a halo of blood.
A few minutes before,
he had been standing outside with Becka,
wearing a Tuxedo.

Null thought this was strange behavior,
and it nearly put him in a foul mood.
Who the hell wore a tux on a day like today, when the temperature was somewhere in the vicinity of the mid-nineties?

Null himself was bathed in a halo of sweat,
but that dim red glow still seemed to emanate from the
chisel-faced boy, and Null began to wonder if it wasn't
just a trick of his mind.

He was use to such tricks.

He had suffered a nervous breakdown two years ago,
had almost not pulled out of the tailspin he had gone
down in,

but was now doing markedly better.

He had even managed to start classes,
like everyone else,
at the university.

Still, there were periods when he was not entirely cer-
tain that he wasn't simply dreaming his life,
back in bed,
rolled up in a little ball and looking at a distant point
in the ceiling. Perhaps a spider.

He had had a dream the other night about the girl
Becka.

Together, they had spent the day running around the
university campus in the hot weather,
drinking cola and sweating and sitting at café tables
and attracting bees.

—Hey,

she had said, in almost the exact manner as Mia Farrow
in *Rosemary's Baby*,

—Let's make love.

So they had gone back to her room, and Bill could

feel himself grow tense and shaky in anticipation.
But it was then he had noticed that something was wrong.

Becka was wrapped up in some sort of burlap sack.
It was cinched around her neck and wrists and waist and
ankles by a system of leather belts.

What was worse, occasional rips in the space revealed
what seemed to be an abundance of fur.

Was Becka not human then?

He had read of pornography
(actually, he had read about it in an interview with J.G.
Ballard)

where men became excited by the prospect of a woman
wrapped up in an old cloth sack.

Face hidden, body a shapeless mystery...

did these men actually garner sexual excitement from
the prospect of unwrapping some sort of hideous mummy?

To forever anticipate that the gift-wrapped girl might
be some monstrous horror of seeping pustules,

boils,

scars,

lesions,

burnt tissue.

Or, perhaps she could be beautiful,

or nothing at all.

At any rate,
the dream had seemed so real,

had morphed so seamlessly into his current memories
and impressions of Becka
that he felt that he couldn't quite stand to think of her
in a sexual manner anymore.
It made him feel like gagging,
as if he had swallowed fur.

They were each given plastic cups full of a cherry-
red liquid that had no taste.
Bill swallowed his dutifully,
sat back,
closed his eyes,
and turned on his music.
It was Strauss — "Blue Danube,"
just what he needed for a round-trip ticket to the cos-
mos,
and he felt the first few giddy stirrings of anticipation
inside as he realized the stuff was taking effect.

Pinpoints of color exploded like miniature bombs
behind his eyes, fireworks of sound shot across the room
like stereophonic missiles,
and he receded into the distance.

It was in a nursing home room,
where an old man was dying,
that he came to a sort of wakefulness.

Had he been dreaming, then?
It made little sense if one thought about it consciously.
Experiments with LSD 25 or whatever were always carried out under controlled conditions,
in a clinical setting...
not in some crowded college lecture hall.
The room was hot and stifling, the sunlight slanted in through the blinds,
occasionally obscured by clouds that turned the entire room a dim grey.

A hatchet-faced boy, a German of obvious German stock
(Aryan blonde with blue eyes and excellent facial geometry)
sat with his girlfriend, two rigid impressions in the gathering murk.
He looked at them as they sat there,
the girl having her coat wrapped around her forearm.

She Was as Beautiful and Terrible as a Japanese Sunrise.

The old man was fat,
had a shock of frizzy gray hair,
and horn-rimmed spectacles.
He sat up,
held out his arms in a Jesus Christ pose,
and said,
—I have betrayed the Lord.

No one knew how to respond.
I make that the German boy is not entirely real,
perhaps some sort of convenient android just shipped
in from Andromeda aboard a space-going freighter.
The lines of his face are rigid and set,
his eyes are twin pools of obsidian.
His teeth are too perfect.

(I, the Narrator, realize I have built robots. Or, rather, I have built them up in the public mind, because one of the jobs I had in telecommunications was to program the dialog for a toy robot on a children's program. The robot is a fraud, a puppet; it doesn't really think. But I can write the script, correct? And it will make the sounds I program it to make, but privately I think the little thing [that looks like a waste paper basket with legs] is sort of depressed about the subordinate role it fulfills. You know actors, always wanting to improvise

lines.

So maybe the robots are taking over. And what does it really mean, this move toward —artificial intelligence? Will our puppet grow perturbed at always having to mouth other people's words? Maybe there is a stream of flowing consciousness we can't understand, some way for the inanimate to become sentient, to begin to think and feel. How long before we live in a world where tiny machines build tiny machines to infest the human body like a virus, and take over from within? I shudder at the thought.)

Null blinks,
and the scene shifts as though he were drunk.
A jump-cut,
like a moment of consciousness edited out,
clipped from the cut-up of life.
The two German students are lolling with the dying uncle on an immense bed,
while he flails about in agony.
Each of them has their tongue extended like a writhing cobra,
licking the top of his dirty old head. Null gets up to leave,
having had quite enough of this.

He goes out into the hall.
Just down the hall is some sort of sitting room.
He goes inside.
It looks to be a comfortable lounge.

The doctor is standing at a podium,
shuffling papers.

—Gentleman and ladies, that is, hostages to fortune. We have called you all here today for the express purpose of showing you some top secret films...stuff the CIA has assured us must remain hidden from the public at large, lest the world erupt into panic or sink into a kind of apathetic malaise, or some such social disintegration result from the, well, uh, anyway, where was I? Ah yes. These films have been smuggled, at the cost of not a few lives, from the nameless and secret cults and organizations which produced them. They concern the intergalactic conspiracy, that is the conspiracy to populate planets with hybridized beings that are partly human, partly...well, that's what we'd like to know. At any rate, relax, and let us begin.

And Null sits back on a divan,
and next to him,
a man in a Victorian suit with a great,
white handlebar moustache sits with a miniature bleeding goat on top of his head.
Null does a double-take; maybe it is just an exceptionally ugly hat.
No, it was simply a frizzy shock of white hair; Null sees that the man is an albino.

The Film Begins.

At first there were a number of boring shots of
men speaking,
men in thick horn-rimmed glasses who were undeniable
experts when not indulging in black scientific studies.
This faded, gradually,
to a panorama of marching boots,
as a column of soldiers seemed to march into outer space
from some bombed-out,
broken Eastern European hellhole of a village.
Interspersed were scenes cut from WW2 films of the
bombing of London,
Hamburg,
Dresden
...columns of emaciated prisoners marched to their death,
and a mad man putting on goggles in anticipation of
the great flash of a nuclear test.

A phony town decimated by a phony bomb.
Mannequins posed in realistic situations,
little girls with dead wigs of fright pose at old tube ra-
dios as the all-consuming fire sweeps over them,
disintegrating their plastic frames into shadow shows
of ash.
(Did time really stop, frozen forever on concrete walls
at Hiroshima?)
I don't know.

The boots march into a constellation,
and right away Null sees that the stars are forming a
giant hammer and sickle.

This is a Communist Propaganda Film.

Two boys sit on a bed,
while a third man,
an older man,
sits down between them,
as if he is some sort of pervert.

—But daddy, what is democracy?

—A poor excuse to let the rabble control the roost.
When the workers finally control the means of production, all else will fall into place.

—Even better, says the apple-cheeked boy to his left.

—All else will become infinite.

The stars of the phony Hollywood constellation form into a giant hammer and sickle symbol, once more. The boots march on.

To his horror,
Null realizes that he is dressed for a costume ball he wasn't invited to.

He is dressed in 18th century garb,
with a powdered wig,
and someone makes out he is the Marquis de Sade.

A perturbed little man approaches him,
puts his fists on his hips and says, —Ah, Marquis, how dare you hide yourself away from little Jacques!

Suddenly,

Null is picked up,
bodily,
and hoisted by the shoulders into a filthy bathroom.
Jacques forces him in front of a mirror,
and reaches up to stick something in his eye.
It is apparently some sort of contact lens.

Bill sees that he has grown haggard in his role as
the Marquis.

One half of his vision is blurred,
the other half is crystal clarity.
Is this the image he wants to project for the world?

He leans forward.

The cup of cherry-red liquid sits on the little desk in
front of him. Below,
the doctor is still shuffling papers.
People are clearing their throats,
coughing,
someone farts and giggles.
Null gets up, gets his books, walks out.

Graveyard Madonna

I once knew a female who moved into the apartment
next door to me. She was a short,
butch little thing,
and she didn't like living in the disgusting, L-shaped
building any more than I did.

Don't remember her name.
suppose it isn't really important.

I remember the day she moved in, though, stand-
ing out on the sun-baked lawn and watching her walk
down the road,
a lonely figure,
edged over into the gravel by cars blowing past at full
speed.

I knew where she was headed.

It's where everyone seems to end up; the cemetery.

Now, she told me later,
—I walked on up the road a piece, and was feeling dusty
and thirsty, but sure as hell forgot all about it as soon
as I saw that big iron gate. It looked like something
out of the last century, something out of a nightmare. I
couldn't help myself, I had to go inside.

—Once inside, I couldn't believe my eyes. This
was no run-to-riot old bone yard; this place had been
cared for and maintained. And it was huge! Huge mar-
ble fountains, and huge monuments, and in the center
of it all that statue. The one that weeps and comes to

life.

—Graveyard Madonna?

She shook her head in the affirmative.

—I saw her come to life that day. Yeah. I took one look at that statue, and it looked like tears were coursing down her cheeks. I looked behind me suddenly, back at the gates, and I could see a shrouded grey figure, the figure of a woman, hurrying out. It had to be her. It was so ghostly. It really gave me the creeps.

—Why does she leave? I wondered.

—I don't know, answered the girl.

—Perhaps she goes in search of blood.

I was certainly in search of something that year.
Walking around outside the school,
I was approached by a reporter for the student paper who
asked me something about rock 'n' roll.

—Sorry fellow, I said, a little arrogantly, —only
thing I listen to is noise.

Across the street was an apple-cheeked boy that
could have been Tom Sawyer.

I immediately felt compelled to cross and talk with him,
as I knew,
like myself,

he was on an adventurer's quest to find SOMETHING
of value and purpose in this purposeless life.

Or,
at least,
he had been called by God,
and such folks always stand out to the nth.

I crossed, said,
—Where you headed to?

He looked sheepish,
or maybe embarrassed,
and stuck his hands in his overall pockets,
and said,

—No place in particular,
but I know this old,
weed-choked path.

Might lead somewhere. You headed out?

I indeed affirmed that I was —headed out.

Town wasn't big enough for me anymore.
I could feel the pressure of the minutes falling on my head like the pounding of a hammer.
And where did I belong in it all? Nowhere. Just another lonely wanderer. Indeed.

—Let's go then. Not sure where we're gonna end up.

—Ain't it more exciting that way?

—Sure.

—You been around here long?

—Long as I can remember.

—Me, I can't remember a time I wasn't around here. Seems like I been wandering these streets and through these lonely old buildings every day, day in and day out, trying to figure out what it all means. What does it all mean? You have any idea?

—No. Wish I did. I'm orphaned every bit as much as you are. Only difference being, I got up this morning and knew, somehow, that things could be different.

—They can be. We just have to follow that old Yellow Brick Road, just like in the movie.

The road wasn't made of yellow bricks,
damn sure of that.

The sidewalk became an overgrown forest,
and on either side gnarled and evil trees bent their devilish fingers to block the sun,
which penetrated in bright little beams,
and dapples,

and pools of shifting light.

We had observed on the cracked pavement a series of hopscotch lines. No big surprise.

They looked as if they had been etched in chalk.

These gave way to more arcane symbols.

I couldn't fathom them; they were the kiddy equivalent of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

They seemed to tell a story of an expedition by some schoolchildren out to this same area,

an expedition that lead to a meeting with a woman in a grey shroud,

or habit.

At least, that was what I could make out by the chalk stick-figures.

The sidewalk cracked and crumbled until it gave way to a dense path of trammeled dirt.

We walked on in silence in the waning daylight until, finally,

we came to a high hump in the ground, surrounded by thick foliage on either side.

It was a might peculiar,
turtle-backed geographical feature,
rising solidly up,
and we knew we would have to climb it,
as going around it seemed impossible.

Tom Sawyer

(or so I had begun to think of him)

decided to go first.

He scrambled on hands and feet over the side,
gripping at fistfuls of weeds,
and I waited a moment before following.
Suddenly, before I was over the sharp rise, just cresting
the top,
I heard him cry out.
I blinked; I couldn't believe my eyes.

There seemed to be some sort of thick mist or fog
developing around him as he stood at the bottom of the
hill.

He had his arms splayed out,
as if to fight back a swarm of invisible bees,
but this mist seemed to gather,
and right away,
as I lay at the top of that tiny mound with dirt all over
me,

I realized that we were in the midst of some sort of supernatural presence.

I remembered what I had heard about Graveyard Madonna,
and shuddered to see my traveling companion tormented
so.

—It's got me, he stated flatly. —I don't think it's
going to let me go.

He looked back up the little mound at me.
His apple-cheeked face was streaked with tears of rage
and humiliation.

I didn't want to go down the hill and join him.

I was stuck, hung up as certainly as the image in the tarot deck.

He seemed to struggle against his misty captor,
before finally crying out and falling to his knees.
I waited, my heart hammering in my chest.
I wanted badly to see what was going to happen next.

Nothing did.

The mist cleared away,
and he crouched on his hands and knees,
breathing heavily.

—It let me go, he said.

—I don't know why. Yes, I know why. It has something
it wants us to do.

I didn't ask what the —It to which he was referring
referred, but climbed down and joined him back along
the path.

We walked on a ways until we came to what seemed an
abandoned lot, with a sort of large pond or almost lake
next to it,
and an old shack or garage,
surrounded by cast-off bottles and old trash.

I rummaged around in the darkness,
pawing through rusted bits of junk and old piles of papers,

and finding nothing that really interested me.

There was a yellowed calendar on the wall,
but it was too dark for me to catch the date.

Tom Sawyer said,

—Null, I think I know what we came here for.

He showed me a little casket he had found.

Or maybe it was a toolbox.

Whatever it was, it was securely fastened,
and it was the right shape of a casket.

—Here, Null, pick it up. Don't it feel special?

—Sure. It feels kinda tingly, and like there may
be something important in it. Hey, you remember those
chalk drawings we saw on the sidewalk?

—Are you thinking what I'm thinking?

I nodded.

I sure was thinking it.

An idea properly presented itself to my buzzing brain.

Tom Sawyer seemed to tighten all about the jaw, and
his eyes took on a hazy look.

—Proper burial at sea.

Well, it wasn't really a sea, of course, but it was
damn close enough for our purposes.

Symbolic.

I carried the little casket out to the water's edge,
and slipped it in.

Curiously, bubbles floated to the surface,
and I panicked for a moment that we had pitched in
something in the box that was still breathing.

Tom did a little salute,
like an old soldier.
I wondered if he might not start humming Taps.
We traveled on.

The House of Seven Sisters

We came to the house of seven sisters,
one of whom, I was delighted to learn, was the inimitable Miss K.

Miss K and I had known each other for years,
and she knew me to be a thoroughly lazy, no-good SOB,
but she had always had a soft spot for me,
screw-up that I was,
so Tom and I were allowed to spend some time in the sisters' house.

It was a weird rectangular sort of open affair for a living room, surrounded by smaller bedrooms and bathrooms,

and we got the idea that the sisters liked to read a great deal,

because the showpiece of the place was a battered old newsstand covered in literary detritus.

Miss K spent her time poring over these old magazines laughing at my antics,
and telling me I should get back in church.

—Null, you old sinner you, she would say,

—When are you going to GROW UP and learn to take some responsibility, huh? I don't think you can go on like this much longer. You're looking a little rough around the edges.

—And you've gained a lot of weight.

Indeed,
all I really felt like doing,
after so long a journey,
was lolling in bed like the lazy, sinful creature that I was.
Miss K simply tittered to herself, smiled, went about her
business, and let me rest; she rarely had a rough word for
anyone, and when she did, it was usually framed in the
form of a jestful comment.

The other sisters made themselves scarce.

There was one incident, however, that bears some repeating.

I was lying in bed one day,
Miss K being either at work or at church
(either way earning her keep and feeding me),
I can't remember which,
when I woke up with two lovely young women in bed
with me.

One was naked except for a pair of tight white
panties.

She was slim,
had short dark hair,
and high, tight little breasts with large nipples.
She was undressing the second girl, who seemed to be
either functionally impaired or mentally slow,
but who could have passed for her twin.

I believe this second girl to be lame,
and confined to a wheelchair most of the time.
I rolled over as these two sat at the edge of my bed,
wondering what in hell was going on that I should be
so lucky.

I wanted both of their slim, hot little bodies,
and I realized that Miss K had probably not let them in
on the fact that I was here and I was a male.

I tried to imagine myself in the sisters' company,
a privy to their female secrets.
Many men could turn themselves into women with the
aid of a cheap wig,
a little make-up,
and a dress.
Shaving, of course, would be a necessity.

Now, with the aid of modern medical science,
a fellow can become a lady with hormones and surgery,
but it is a long and arduous process, and not for many.
Instead, wouldn't it be better to simply use a false vagina,
a false set of breasts
(made specifically of plastic or latex),
and the accoutrements of femaleness,
rather than go all-out and get cut?
In my case, yes, since all I wanted to do was to share in
their little female secrets,
to undress with them,
and to play their games on their own terms.

It was not long after that that Tom Sawyer vanished.

He must have slipped out one morning,
gone back on his road to find his fate and fortune,
because I didn't see him again for many years.

I examined some of Miss K's reading material,
which she left on her bed.

It was all dirty horror comics.

I wasn't surprised.

Next thing I knew,

I think I woke up in hell.

It was some sort of musical pandemonium,
and I must tell you it was a personal hell,
for a limited number of recognizable faces made appearances there.

Hell was apparently, for me, a rundown movie theatre,
featuring a number of dull-as-paste rock 'n' roll acts,
each of which was more terrible and bland than the last.
I wandered around through the milling crowd,
wondering what had become of Miss K and her sisters.
Then I remembered it had been years since I had seen them last.

Miss K wouldn't be caught dead in a place like this, I surmised,
and went in the back,
to a place that looked like a filthy kitchen with yellow tiled walls.

The Prison Laundry

(A thin old man in a Victorian suit walks down a gravel pathway, past the brooding remains of a factory, missing his pants. He has on large boxers, black garters, a bowler hat, and is carrying an umbrella, but he is naked to the waist. The boxers have red polka dots.)

He's been to the prison laundry.

The scene shifts.

Somewhere,

in a little parlor,

a Nazi sits eavesdropping on a group of people using a Ouija Board.

Or, at least, he is some sort of pseudo-Nazi:

he has a black uniform,

red and white armband with a cross,

and he broods in Wagnerian style.

A fat blonde woman with blubbery lips turns to me,

puts a finger to her mouth as if to say —shh!

and says,

—He's back again. This time, he takes the form of a monkey. Next time he'll be something else. Don't be fooled, though.

This Is a Devil in Disguise

I can't fathom as to what she's referring,
until I look over at a cubby in the wall,
expecting to see a pot of geraniums,
and instead spy the form of a chattering monkey.
Monkeys and spirits are both known to spout gibberish,
but a spirit will not hit you with a fistful of shit.
(Well, perhaps streamers of rotten ectoplasm, but that
is hardly the same thing.)

We cut back to the old man,
who is walking on the curb, balanced precariously.
He is a 1910 banker with a white moustache,
a monocle,
huge cigar poked into the corner of his liver lips at a
phallic angle
...but no pants.
Just fluffy white polka dot boxer shorts,
and how the hell can this image crop up so often in the
consciousness I don't know.

So he makes it to the prison laundry,
wherein a little window of plexiglass like a microwave
oven door is situated over a huge, rusted sink.
The water is filthy.
He takes off his boxers,
passes them to the man on the other side of the window,
and they are heated up in some strange manner.

Then he thrusts his hands, coat sleeves and all, down into the dirty water, coming up with a bar of ivory soap and the end of an old green hose, looks like a twist of snake.

So somehow the boxers are cleaned.

Next, we see him talking to a cowboy.

Nazi Monkey Séance, He Said

—He was walking around the room, in an intense, angry, brooding manner, but no one was paying him any attention. His uniform was midnight black. On his left arm, a red and white armband with a black cross in the center completed the portrait of a brooding, dissatisfied individual who was perched, always, just on the point of exploding into some violence.

—However, no one wanted to pay him any mind, or seemed to even notice that he was in the room. Perhaps he wanted it that way, since it would make it easier to eavesdrop.

—Near his chair, illuminated under an even pool of light, sat several people at a Ouija board. The nature of the communications they were receiving is not now known, although what is known was that they were successful in breaking through to something mischievous. It is, by the way, in the nature of many spirits communicating in such a fashion to utter mischievous gibberish, or to engage in shenanigans, and perhaps that is why this particular spirit kept manifesting in the form of a gibbering monkey.

—This monkey must have been causing mischief for the assembled sitters for quite some time, for one large, blonde woman turned to me, put a finger to her lips, and whispered,

—He's back again. This time, he takes the form of a

monkey. Next time, he'll be something else. Don't be fooled though. This is a devil in disguise.

—Indeed, even as she said this, I looked over at the window, and could see that, perched in a recess that should, under normal circumstances, have held a pot of flowers, was a little black and grey chimpanzee. Very small, with beady, menacing eyes, and an occasional flapping of the arms.

—I could have none of this right now, but remembered that I needed, quite badly, to go and get my laundry. So I started out, dressed in a suit jacket, a bowler hat, a nice shirt, tie, and sporting a white moustache, goatee, socks held up by garters, and fine leather shoes. Apparently I had grown very old and very thin in the last few moments.

—I began my trek to the laundry on a strange, decaying, paved road that wound around at an impossible angle, along a sidewalk that eventually disappeared into a rocky curb. I found it easy to balance upon this curb, even though it was smaller across than a large beam of wood. I grumbled and cursed as I went along.

—Suddenly, standing outside myself, I could see that, though I was dressed to the nines, so to speak, I had forgotten to put on my pants, and was thus wearing only my multicolored boxer shorts, with the nice shirt tucked into the top of them. I don't know if I ever rectified this situation, but I doubt it.

—I am at church you understand, and sitting in the seats next to this old, loud, boozy sot, and I turn to him and say, —I'm getting out of here. This is the fucking People's Temple all over again.

—So I go outside and the traffic is bad. I'm in Texas, and there must be some sort of festival going on because the streets are full of people milling about, moving slowly, an Exodus of worshippers perhaps. And so I follow the crowd, but I begin to understand they are headed to a Catholic church, and I'm not Catholic, so I blow and go back inside.

—My family is at the Catholic church, I understand.

—Someone tells me this.

—I'm not sure why I believe them.

—I'm hungry.

—I'm looking for that free meal.

—So this preacher, who is some young cult leader wired like Jim Jones and all these guys, is sitting behind a desk, and the room is filled with his thugs. This guy is some sort of major criminal. He has a jar with a python in it.

—He holds the jar against my face, but I sit there and take it. What else can I do? He unscrews the lid, slowly, and the damn thing shoots out, biting him on the back.

—He pulls the serpent away from him, fondling it lovingly in his hands. The mouth of this serpent is enormous. It could swallow infants whole. He suddenly thrusts the thing between his legs, and now he has an enormous, writhing snake-cock. It might be dripping semen, or poison for all I know, but I don't want to stick around and find out. I make a run for it. Outside, I join a procession of mendicants all trudging toward the great Catholic cathedral that is somewhere in the hot bowels of the city.

—Next thing I know I'm on stage. Writhing around, unleashing my serpent power. Bestial, I bite into my microphone. I pull back my hand and taste a mouthful of wires. Someone yells something insulting. The lights go up. The world spins on.

—He hijacked the laundry truck. Walked right up to the driver's side window, pulled out his gun, and started waving it around. The driver, a young woman with tired eyes and dust in the crevices of her face, already knew who he was.

—Oh put that toy away, she hissed at him. —It isn't loaded and you know it!

—Yes it is, yes it is! Blow a hole clean through your head, Rudy Jean. Now scoot over and let me behind that wheel.

—She did as he said. It was a bright, cold day.

—She turned around and got a good look at him, His jaw seemed to be working spasmodically. She was chewing gum, but she wondered if maybe he hadn't gotten some cocaine leaves or something mixed in with his tobacco. At any rate, spittle was dripping down onto his skinny chin. He was at least dressed nice, like a back-alley pimp from 1920. He was even wearing gloves.

—You're dressed real nice, Bub. It's your funeral after all.

—Shoot, them laws ain't never gonna ketch me!

—Oh sure they will, and when they do they're gonna put you away forever. Or give you the chair. And I'll get my name in the paper, and maybe the pages of Time. Might even make a movie out of it all, dontcha think? Well, they might!

—She suddenly felt a little like crying. He smiled, screeched out of the parking lot, and did a U-turn onto

the street. She could smell burning rubber and hear the chug of the engine sputtering as it spat a string of smoky donuts out the rusted tailpipe. Why had he decided to take the laundry truck?

—Why the laundry truck, Bub?

—Need to make me a quick getaway, see. I'm on the lam from the last bank heist I pulled. Everyone else headed to Minneapolis. Me, I'm nothing but a little fish in a great big pond. I got separated from my gang when them G-men surrounded us at the motor court. Had to shoot my way out, steal a car, tied the driver up in the trunk. Shot enough holes in it to give him plenty of air.

—She noticed for the first time that he had bit his lip. There was blood coursing down his chin in a little rivulet of red. He was jacked up on adrenalin, or something akin to it, and she thought he was telling wild tales.

—Now come on, Bub, you didn't really do all them things, did ya?

—He looked angry, like his half-lit fuse was ready to pop into a miniature firecracker of rage.

—Yes I did, yes I did! You'll hear about it all real soon, too, Rudy Jean. Be in all the papers, coast to coast. Bubba James O'Reilly, FBI's Ten Most Wanted list. I'm telling you, I done made history.

—The way he was driving, he was going to be history if he wasn't careful. He nearly ran up and over curbs, shooting the yellow line, swerving to avoid oncoming

traffic and pedestrians.

—You damned idiot, you're gonna get us killed if you ain't careful!

—Not a chance! I'm one of the best drivers I know. That's why they picked me to drive the getaway car.

—Then why ain't you driving that instead of a stolen laundry truck?

—He grimaced. He supposed she had a point. Around them, the neighborhood grew seedier the farther they went past the triple underpass. Rudy Jean realized they were headed for Little Harlem.

—Row upon row of pawn shops and dirty, down-and-out little markets made space for pool halls and tenement doorways where skinny black men stood in the shadows, ringed by reefer smoke, and kids played jump rope and hopscotch on cracked cement. Tired women in ratty dresses stood out on the corners, purses clutched tightly in white knuckles, faces painted a little too white over bruises and lipstick smeared on too thick and hair sprayed into a coif that made them all look like they were headed to a bad junior prom. Whores and pimps, she thought. Dope pushers and hoodlums.

—Suddenly, Bub snapped up and said, —Okay Rudy Jean, this is where you and I part company.

—What are you talkin' about now?

—I mean this is where you get out. I'm not taking you hostage, girl. I just need the truck. Amscray!

—He pulled over to the curb, put it in idle, and

turned to her, waving the gun vaguely in her direction.

—Go on. You get yourself a cab back to work, or wherever. And remember: you don't know who it was stole the truck. Just some stranger. Otherwise, I might come back some day and pay you a little visit. You got that?

—Rudy Jean twisted around on the seat, started to say something smart, looked at the gun, thought better of it, and grabbed up her purse. He said, —Not so fast. I need some money.

—She paused for a moment.

—How much?

—How much you got?

—She looked in her billfold. She had enough for a cab and a sandwich.

—Just a few dollars.

—Here—

—He reached into her billfold, pulled out the small wad of dollars, and threw her back a couple. She made a little —humph, and quickly got out of the truck, slamming the door shut, and telling him, —I hope they put you away forever for this, Johnny O'Reilly. I really, sincerely hope they do.

—He smiled that famous grin, the one he said got girls wet between the legs, and rumbled away into the distance. Suddenly, she was alone on the street.

—Her shadow fell in front of her, long and lonely across the pavement. Somewhere, a jump rope song belted

out high and sinister to the staccato rhythm of little feet. She could feel the minutes steadily tick away as she clack-clacked down the filthy sidewalk, past old trash cans and a few bums laid out in smelly display. How was she going to hail a cab down here? Did cabs even come down here?

—A tall black kid wolf whistled to her from a shabby doorway. He said, —Hey Momma, whynchoo come on in here? We can have us a little fun.

—She didn't pay him any mind, but started to cross the street. Suddenly, there were a couple of young men at her back. They flanked her on either side, standing in the middle of the road, and one of them said,

—Hey baby, whatchoo doin' down here? Huh? You got yourself a date or somethin' girl?

—She didn't know what to say, but suddenly she felt long fingers on her shoulder, and she jumped, saying, —Get your damn hands off me!

—Aw c'mon, little lady! You ought to learn and be a little more friendly!

—She was ready to scream when, suddenly, she saw another figure come walking across the street slowly. At first, she couldn't see any features

—(his back was to the setting sun),

—but soon he got close enough so that she could see he was a sailor. A big guy. Square jaw. Big knuckles with rough tattoos.

—Leave her alone, you damn—

—He used the one word that she was sure he shouldn't have used just then. Was he suicidal? The hands suddenly left her shoulders. The man on her left said,

—What the hell?

—Dude got a death wish.

—Fool, you better get on out of here and quit foolin' around in what ain't none of yo' damn business.

—They started to circle the Sailor, and he crouched down, balled his fists, and got ready for a street fight. One of them stooped to pick up a bottle at his feet.

—That was a mistake. The Sailor kicked upward, sending the hand holding the bottle flying back, then kicked again into the center of his chest, sending him spiraling backward into the street. His partner suddenly produced a switchblade, and the Sailor said, —Put that toy away before you get hurt.

—He grabbed the hand holding the blade, twisted it back until the kid started screaming. The blade clattered to the ground. Suddenly both of them, realizing they were outmatched by the Sailor, decided they didn't want to hang around. They took off down the sidewalk, casting hateful, scared glances behind them as they went. The Sailor started laughing; he hadn't even broken a sweat.

—He stooped and picked up the switchblade. He closed it, put it in his pocket, and said,

—We need to get out of here. They'll be back soon, a whole gang of 'em.

—He then let loose with a stream of the most racist invective Rudy Jean had ever heard, stuff that made her blush. Was he in the KKK or something? She didn't know. She was damn glad, however, that he had happened by.

—C'mon, we can hide in here.

—He grabbed her arm and led her across the street to a dusty, boarded-up little shop. He opened the door (that seemed to be hanging halfway off the hinges), and they entered a dark, musty-smelling old shop with a few dressmakers' dummies and a few old racks of coats. The ceiling was dripping, seemed to be falling in; there were piles of old, broken furniture in the corner. She thought she could hear a rat squeak—realized where there was one, there was probably a thousand.

—I guess we need to get to know each other, huh?

—She turned and looked at him. He was standing there, his massive coiled, snake-like arms held stiffly out at his sides. He had an expression on his face, like an open, eager child. But it was false, she could see. Behind it, twitching like some spasmodic parasite in his skull, was another face, a brutal face of rigid, geometric planes that ended in sharp, spike-like points. This was the face of a ruthless killer.

—He walked up to her. She could smell whiskey on his breath.

—Hey baby, he said, drawling the words out into a suggestive purr. Why don't you just relax, huh? I mean,

c'mon, a girl like you all alone, in a place like this. What could happen to you, I don't like to think about. You know, I've been in situations like this before, baby, and they all pretty much end the same way. A girl falls all over a guy like me, just can't help herself. Otherwise, she just goes to pieces...loses her head.

—His eyes suddenly grew black. She blinked; she couldn't believe what she was seeing. It was as if the whites of his eyes had disappeared. She could see the animal skull popping out from beneath the thin veneer of his skin.

—Loses her head...loses her head...loses...

—He kept saying it. If Rudy Jean knew what a mantra was, she would have said that was what he was chanting. His heavy, muscled arm twitched. She looked from his cruel eyes, from his broken nose and brutal face, to his hand. He was holding what appeared to be an old table leg.

Eclipse

So the two of them set off cross-country,
and he has maybe robbed a convenience store.
The way this went down is he went in with the gun under
his coat,
and a ski mask,
and made the clerk go in the back and lie down on the
floor.
Now the clerk is lying in a pool of his own piss,
and the kid is going through the safe,
and he finds what he wants and the girl says,
—Those hamburgers were so bad we ought to go back
there and shoot all them people.

That was the way they were.

Once, the boy had a dream that he went to a used book-
shop,
and bought some kind of romantic book,
shape of a heart.

But when he gave it to the girl and she tore the gift wrap-
ping off of it, she started flipping the pages,
and her mouth fell open. She didn't know whether to
laugh or cry, because it was a book of homicide photos.
And homicide was something they would become pro-
ficient at

One Night They Made Love on the Railroad Tracks

car stalled,
thrusting against each other while a train whistled low
in the distance, chugging along the tracks.

Would they make it in time?

It was all either sex or death with them,
a real nihilist trip,
doomed lovers, Romeo and Juliet of the gutters, that
sort of thing.

Once I met her sister,
or spiritual sister.

It was in a bus terminal on a winter day,
when I was driving through one of the northeastern states,
and she said, —Hey, why don't you take a look at these
pictures.

—What pictures?

—These. They're professional. Hot stuff. I'm gonna
be a model someday. Anyway, Burt says I have that spe-
cial something.

And she is this hot little number in a miniskirt,
plaid miniskirt,
with a cheesy sort of pale complexion and a few freck-
les,
and shaggy shock of short dark hair,
cut in a boyish little thing that was quite fetching.
And a smoking figure.
Great ass.

So I take the book,
and realize it is by —Burt Bacharach,
and is full of little black and white photos of her in silk
stockings, garters,
panties,
Thong

...Betty Page-style bedroom fetish stuff.

She stands up and bends over to pick something up off
the floor,

I guess it is her handbag.

But I've met a thousand girls like this in my time,
and she leaves only a fleeting impression.

But getting back to where I was at,
the boy robbed the convenience store,
and the two headed off cross-country.
What they did in all that time is probably a matter for
another story,
but the boy slowly lost his mind.

He started carrying around an old gun under his coat,
walking like Lee Van Cleef into seedy bars and old dives,
and even around sagging,
dirty, down-at-the-heels supermarkets
and food pantries like he was *El Hombre Invisible*.

He was a tall,
raw-boned motherfucker with long, dirty fingers and
high,
Nordic cheekbones. His girl had long dark hair,
a skinny figure,

no ass to speak of,
and could barely walk in high heels.

She was maybe five feet tall and had a dark complexion.

(So he is chugging breakfast lunch and dinner out
of brown paper bags, and she is peddling her ass on the
street)

...and I have a strange dream wherein I am escorted, by a huge, hulking sexless individual with wild, frizzy black hair and a black robe, into the mouth of a mausoleum. Inside, the walls are white, there are nooks and crannies with fake flowers (real flowers would wilt and rot and turn brown), and warbling, high-toned music that sounds like distorted strings and choirs of children

...This music is recorded, on a permanent loop (like Time and Life and Reality Itself),

and finally we go up staircases and down corridors and tour the occult architecture of this place that looks a lot smaller on the outside than it really is, and the hulking figure stops by a baby casket and pulls out what looks to be a length of yarn. Right away I make this is one of the Three Fates: Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos.

These

—Moirai

spin and cut the thread of life for each mortal.

Was this character spinning and cutting my own personal thread?

I turned to head out the door; I didn't want to see the heavy iron scissors come out.

Hanging from the doorway of the mausoleum is a noose.

I'm compelled to put my neck through the noose, and am pushed out the door, but the neck never snaps back and I find myself seated at a huge dinner table in the middle of a cemetery.

My grandmother is there,
but gets up because she says she has to go smoke some
cigarettes.

One of my grandmothers is dead.
I saw her last night in an old rocker.
Apparently, she had some sage words of wisdom for me
that I can't quite recall.
I recall her complaining about a man that owed her money.
That's it.

The last thing I remember is looking over at the
mausoleum,
and there is a pane of dark, cracked glass in the door,
and I can see the heavy, black-robed figure
reflected in the glass.
I know then that he is a spirit, and he disappears faster
than my eyes can perceive his flight.

Our Young Couple

The boy finally goes mad,
starts running up and down the street popping his little
gun,

a baggie of liquor under his arm,
and the cops hogtie him,
and someone decides he is mentally sick.

So they take him on a stretcher to a nursing home to
dry out.

He looks really ridiculous.

Maybe he's killed someone and they'll try him for it
later.

Maybe he popped an old wino,
who held his heart with blood-blackened fingers,
vomited out some gruel,
and said,

—Aw...goodbye cruel world!
before falling flat onto the shitty, garbage-strewn con-
crete.

I don't know.

The Festival

Walking the grounds in a world of prayer,
Past icons and crucifixes planted in the grass,
While the murmur of meditation hums out
Across a rolling landscape of pools and ice.
—We've invited these people here
(But God knows who they all are)
And they've let their excrement flow,
To fling about
And leave in soft curls of stench like brown pythons
Of dung creeping boot heel in the boiling cold.
—I'm here for the music,
To loll in bed with bic lighter and a trollop
And reminisce about the good old days
I never experienced.
The stage is set for the Second Coming
Man in cloak and robe is black like Jesus
Weeping from the well.
Arms outstretched, the sinister demagogue pounds the
pavement,
Informing us that maleficent magic will not be toler-
ated.
Big man in a soft foam Stetson cowboy hat looks like
he
Has come to be my comic relief.
I crest the edge of a snow drift and look down
Into the still, untroubled waters of an icy lake

As the sermon reaches a fever pitch and I feel my ass
sliding

Down the drift of slush

To death plop into the freezing water

And I drown.

Later I am walking pavement in slices of green lawn

And lazy hill and shallow dip

As I move past the fountain into a nook

And the kid to my left says

“The sound system looks like it will work” and I try the
microphone but the stage was left somewhere back in
the beginning of last night’s journey.

Plop.

Someone hits me with a finger full of shit.

Plop, plop...

Now I stink as my throat closes up.

—Don’t go back there. It’s what’s reeking, says the kid,
And I bend over to wash my throat from a drinking
fountain

That is just a little too conveniently placed.

And Ah! I think to myself

This really is just a dream!

Running Down My T-shirt I Wonder

In the middle of the night the boy is awakened from a doped stupor by the image of his girlfriend.

She is standing naked in the darkness, staring at him.

He pulls the tubes out of his nose, the I.V. out of his arm, and reaches for her.

He wants her badly,
the way thirst wants water,
the way fire wants kindling.

He needs her like a shot of booze.

But he realizes she's in another place, an old rabbit-bitten pasture. Behind her,
the ground falls inward until it is a grave.

She looks at him a moment with that same insect stare,
that cold appraisal of hidden contempt,
and knows that he'll follow her wherever she goes.

She then turns around and dives into the grave.

She dies with a needle sticking out of her arm.
Body turned blue in an abandoned apartment.
Somehow, this has all been a revelation about life and death.

But I'm not sure.

—She reached up and clawed his eyes, sinking her fingernails in as deep as they would go, and he screamed, dropping his club. He bent over, and she bolted into the darkness, knocking over the dressmakers' dummies and plunging into the maze of hallways in back of the place. He started running after her, swinging his club, yelling obscenities at the top of his lungs, calling her a

—bitch,

a

—pig,

a

—dirty street-walking, cum-guzzling whore.

—He would dirty the club with her blood. Later, they would find the body sprawled in the darkness, but, by then, the Sailor was long gone.

—It was night, or some facsimile thereof. But there was a good moon.

—Finally, I made it to the large building wherein the laundry was situated. I went to a huge metal sink, very white yet very old and full of dirty water. Just above it, a plexiglass door, that looked exactly like a microwave oven door, waited for me to open it. On the other side, the laundry workers passed the dirty boxer shorts into the hole, where they were heated up by some method to which I was unfamiliar. I took out a pair which I identified immediately as mine, and thrust them down into the dirty water of the sink. I suddenly found myself holding a bar of Ivory soap and the end of a garden hose. I somehow managed to juggle all of these, scrub my underwear, and make them disappear upon my person in some fashion that I now find baffling.

—Somewhere along the line, I must have stopped and had a conversation with a cowboy. And I wonder now: Why is it that I, a patron of the laundry, was required to wash my own dirty underwear in public?

—Later, I woke up speaking German.

There were people running about,
sweating,
preparing food,
but it all looked pretty inedible.

I remembered my time in prison,
eating at the prison commissary,
with hobos and tramps dressed in ratty suits
up before me to commit sex acts and acts of violence
over metal trays of pink food that looked like Italian
vomit.

And you didn't dare sit at the wrong table in that cafeteria.

Or maybe I am confusing that with my time in the
homeless shelter.

My mind is like a Moebius strip,
doubling back on itself,
one curved line cutting through memories that move,
like twin strands of a double-headed cobra,
through the recesses of my subconscious.
(Which is where I live.)

Suddenly I hear walls of feedback explode from
the stage out front. Huge electronic explosions,
white noise landscapes,
synthesizer degradation,
vast rumbles
and laser explosions
created a landscape for me that was transporting me,
bodily and spiritually,

into another realm.

I felt myself being lifted,
nearly floated back out into the concert hall.

A middle-aged man with heavy horn-rimmed glasses
sat behind a huge wall of electrical gear,
pressing buttons and turning knobs,
creating a music the likes of which I had never heard,
a music that was wild and free from constraint.

It was rapturous transport of feedback and audio collage,

and I felt the molecules of my body begin to shimmer
and vibrate with a new understanding.

Suddenly, everything speeded up.

Violence began to erupt in the audience,
as people began to gibber and lose their minds,
running about in the darkness and confusion,
sawing off each other's limbs,
pulling each other apart piece by piece,
and running through the crowd with pieces of twisted
metal hook, turning over chairs,
ripping out the stuffing,
starting fires,
stooping to shit in the aisles,
and fornicating in anticipation of Judgment.

In the midst of it all,
a character strides up to me through the confusion,
seemingly unscathed by all that is going on around us.

It is Tom Sawyer.
He is older, heavier, and looks taller.
But it is unmistakably him.

I notice he has a chain around his neck,
extending up in some manner to the ceiling.
I reckon he has found his way in life.

His wife runs up to him.
She is a tall blonde girl,
healthy and young, a real looker.
I think she is trying to escape an eager group of gang
rapists.

—It's His chain. Yes, Null, I've finally found Him.
And he wants you too. You can believe that.

He seemed sad though.
Like maybe he didn't like the idea of being chained
to an invisible being beyond the ken of mortal under-
standing.

And we are not talking a metaphorical chain here; this
was thick old log chain around his neck,
and I was sure he had to wear it forever.

So I got out of there quick,
although I'm not sure how I escaped.
I remember being back at my grandmother's,
who is dead,
and her house has really fallen on hard times.
It looks like it should be condemned.

I'm not sure who is taking care of it,
but they've saved my mail,
and it consists of a French bread roll sent out by my
publishing company—but no bottle of wine.

Damn.

The bread is too old to eat.

I stuff it back in the box and go into the bedroom,
where Granpa use to sleep in walk-in closet before he
died.

His closet room is still the same way he left it:
little and shrunken and full of old radio parts,
model airplanes,
and what tin cans of edibles he munched in the wee
hours of the morning before sleep came.
No one has touched a thing; no one, that is, except for
the rats.

I quickly learn there is a place for me at a special
school.

Now, this education thing is routine,

Happens in Fits and Starts.

—This time, I am in a large, gymnasium affair that could easily be the Y downtown, expanded into some sort of Japanese institute. There are a myriad of tired cops sleeping here, and one of them has something in his room I want. I know this as instinctively as I know my name is Null, and that the world, quite frequently, doesn't make much sense from my own particular vantage point. I ask another cop about it, and he says, — He's gone out on assignment. Just go right on in and look around.

—Yeah, but what if he comes back before I'm out of there? I don't want to get busted.

—The cop blows smoke and looks off into the distance. It is night, and we are standing outside. It is cold. The cop is wearing a heavy trench coat and a rueful smile. His hair is wispy and unkempt, and sandy brown. His eyes show amusement.

I'm Sneaking Through the Library

looking for a lost Steinbeck.

I know it's here somewhere,
hidden on these esoteric old shelves,
a worm-eaten old thing with crumbling pages and a seductive orange skin.

Yesterday we talked about Malcolm X in the classroom,

while I chewed on a bundle of rubber worms.

(Not that they tasted like potato chips.)

I spat up violently, but the lecture went on and on.

It must have been a conspiracy.

Three shots for Kennedy.

I don't know how many for Malcolm X,

but his relative,

who was giving the lecture,

looked uncomfortable.

I wonder if it was because,

sometime earlier,

a troop of German youths had lead everyone in a rousing chorus of the

—Horst Wesel Lied,

while my soul languished in frozen tuba clitoris of "Triumph of the Will."

But yesterday was a dream of pirates,
as I scribbled nonsensical in my little book,

remembering other lives lived in spaces between.

Phantom images of 17th Century ghost ships and maniacal captains, making captives swim the cement channel above deck

(but how can THIS be?),

and me with a blonde-headed, pigtailed girl who couldn't swim,

old-time dress billowing in the filthy scum water as her head bobbed down

glug,

glug.

—Just don't think about it, and you can make it.

But she never did, and died.

But the librarian assures me they have had the book before.

It must have vanished.

It must have taken up legs and walked away.

She leads me over to a stack of books with garish covers—comic book books.

I don't read 'em.

I want the Steinbeck, and I mean to get it.

Finally,

I see they have hidden it from me on the other side of the shelf,

amidst a collection of books that are, somehow, all wrong.

I take it carefully in my hands,

not liking the weight of it,

or the smell,
and slip it under my jacket. Then,
when the old battle axe has her back turned,
I slip out into the hallway, to make my escape.

I creep carefully, so carefully, down the hallways,
turning left,
right,
left.

I spy a pair of double doors. I walk toward the double
doors, my prize under my arm,
and carefully crack them open to see inside.

Inside is a woman I've had sexual relations with.
Her back is turned to me,
and she is grown immensely fat.

A clothesline stretches from one end of the room to
the other.

She is hanging up dripping sheets in her underwear.
She's a meter at the hips, at least.

I sneak back out of the room,
suddenly shocked,
wanting to avoid her at all costs.

If she sees me,
I am a dead man; I might as well hang this caper out to
dry, like dirty laundry.

I finally make it outside to the stone stairway.
Outside, a getaway car is raring and ready to go.
Standing outside the car is the chauffeur,

I recognize as being my tall, fat, frizzy-haired uncle,
who is curly and grey.

I know him well.

He died years ago.

We beat a retreat.

Apparently, he takes me back to the school,
where we study piano for a little while.

I play an old tune by Anton LaVey,
while a young man comes in,
looks at the keyboard as if he is about to be angry,
and then I realize that the keys are falling out like rotten
teeth beneath my fingers.

Somehow, though, my project is changed on me.
I am now digitizing a painting,
entering it into a computer program,
where the screen demands you fill in certain fields of
information, although I can't make heads or tails out of
any of it. The painting is one I did long ago, called —
Desert Angel—a sort of nod at Fellini and all women
who appear,
mysterious as outer space revenants...

In the Midst of Our Forlorn Wanderings

Flowers bloom pale and beautiful under the arc of
the waning moon.

I stand exultant.

I Live.

—Damn you, Null, you've wandered off the road
again.

I do that.

Later, I find a pipe with a screw in it.

I start to unscrew the screw,

and I find that the pipe is apparently possessed,
as it begins to make a series of strange beeping sounds
that are quite beautiful.

I unscrew a bit more,

and suddenly I am hearing voices.

I know the voice.

I ask someone about it while sitting on a wall out-
side.

I don't get a straight answer.

I want to record the voice from the talking pipe,
which says something about the divisions of —five di-
mensions.

But I don't have a tape recorder.

I walk down some stairs to a swimming pool.

Water to cleanse the stink.

To be baptized and reborn.

To another day,
another life.

Null out.

—Did her face freeze in terror, like some snapshot of a tortured goddess, in the pale moments before she knew the agony of her own death? Did the both of them form a macabre ballet, a lover's tryst of absurd and gothic proportions, as his huge hands wrapped leather garrote around her throat like a ribbon of killing beauty? Did Mary Kelly know the precise geometric angles that her own corpse would come to repose in, moments after Jack the Ripper had left her a butchered rag? Are such mathematics quantified by God, or is the Law of the Universe one of random chance, blood spattering where it may, flesh and guts falling, without care or toil, through empty shadows of meaningless time?

—Or is this all just bullshit?

—I don't know.

—Around me, children scream.

—The Wolf is a character in a fairy tale.

—I shovel rabbit shit on the deck of the intergalactic freighter EDX.

—It's safer up here, and much more sane.

—THEY...are vegetarians.

The Hotel Room Was Brightly Lit

She cut an imposing figure in her black dress.

I set down my briefcase.

We hadn't seen each other in many years.

—I'll tell you. You sure have changed since the last time.

I had.

I was fat and bald and not very good-looking anymore.

She seemed not to have put on much weight,

but she was always heavy,

and her flesh had that same doughy color that was always a slight turn-off.

—I've got a ring here. It's got my name on it. See?

She held it up.

It caught the light like a glittering star.

What was I doing here?

—The days pass so quickly now.

—They drop like little tears into the ocean of time.

—That metaphor is...trite.

—Yeah, well, you're a fucker and always have been.

It's why you left.

—I left because I couldn't deal with you anymore.

The mental and emotional torment became overwhelming. Mind-numbing. Too much for me.

—Yeah, poor little you. Always so lost and alone.

—It's what I was born to.

—That's not quite right, though, is it Null? You

had your chance and blew it. That's why you've come back to me. So we can die together again, for one more night.

—Your poetic sentiments are lost on me.

—Your cynicism is always so poignant. Now, come here and kiss me.

I didn't want to.

I didn't want to be near her.

I remembered a time, not long ago, when the whole world seemed to revolve around the two of us.

Our Little Kingdom of Shit

Dead flies blowing in a hot breeze.
Two souls trapped in a tiresome game.
All the screaming,
all the empty, lonely moments we tried to fill
with fleeting,
happy
memories.

I looked up.
She was slipping out of her dress.
She looked heavy, gravid.
I wondered if she was going to give birth.

Someone wrote to me, —...you're walking along,
and suddenly you fall into her vagina.

I have no idea why they penned that, but it rang true all
of a sudden.

I had been with other women, of course,
had slinked through the scum of spit and sweat and skin
until I felt I was finally satisfied.

But nothing had ever seemed right; I was still alone.

—I want to tell you about something, she said,
slipping off her bra. Her breasts were heavy,
pendulous globes, punctuated by large nipples.

I felt nothing.

I was as stale and empty as the bitter funk from an old
room.

—I had a dream, she said,
her eyes frosting over
as she unwrapped from the cocoon of her clothing.
—I had a dream, and I think it means something.
—Oh yeah, I said, —just what do you think it
means?

She slid out of her skirt.
Her pubic hair was a wild tuft of red between doughy,
pale thighs,
too flabby
and as unappealing as anything I had ever seen.
I could imagine the musty odor of her womanhood.
(Vagina, let's be clinical, shall we?)

—I'm not sure. In the dream, you were at your
grandmother's house. The one who is dead. And the
rest of your family were gathered there. All of them
were getting ready to eat, except for you. It was like you
weren't allowed to eat with them. You were busy slaving
away in the kitchen, preparing a great pot of food. The
pot had a number of strange, what seemed like pipes
emerging from it. I still don't understand.

—Neither do I. Was there any more?

—Yes. That dream segued into another.

But I already knew what she was going to describe.

The sheriff was a stout man in a tan uniform.

He had a moustache and a gut.

He walked with assurance around the yard.

It was a hot summer day.

I was standing just over his shoulder,
staring down at two groups of scruffy-looking teenagers.

One group was lined up against a car.

The leader of the group

(or the boy who seemed the leader),

sat with a wide grin on his thin, angular face.

They Looked Like the Collective Members of the Manson Family

I didn't know what was going on,
but I knew it wasn't good.
The sheriff put his fists on his hips and strutted around.
I wondered if he was going to call for backup.

One group of teens was pressed up against the bumper
of a car on cinder blocks.
It was a collection of boys and girls,
although it seemed like more girls.
Giggling skanks,
teenage tramps.
All of them seemed to be dressed in dark shades of old,
unwashed clothing,
worn at the knees and elbows.

Another group of teens was sitting in a row to the
side of them.
They seemed a lot more glum,
disinterested.
One of them had a beard.
I don't recall much about them.
I recall it was a bright day,
that the house we were all standing in front of was very
old.
The lawn was overgrown with clumps of weed,
and I could feel sweat prickling my brow.

I was already familiar with the sheriff and how he
did things.

Three kids,

one of them a little man with two black eyes,
all gathered around a table.

The coke is there,

cut into lines,

and the little man traces the shape of a dollar bill in the
coke.

The sheriff is taunting them with the stuff.

He takes a girl by the wrists, drags her into the next
room.

It is dark, a living room.

He opens a drawer,

pulls out a plastic bag full of pills,

waves it under her nose.

She struggles against him and cries.

I was sitting with them at the table,
just behind the sheriff's left shoulder.

A Drive Down a Lonely Street Terminates in Death

The sheriff will never relent.

He is driven and apocalyptic,

a killing-machine of icy, brutal hate,

driven just past the point where frenzy is masked by a
cold,

thin veneer of sanity.

I look up from my reverie.

A mountain of flab is pressing her cold flesh down on me,

I am being raped by the cellulite-riddled body of my ex-wife.

I am pinned like a fly beneath the mandibles of a hungry spider. Vagina dentate; the sex that castrates.

My mind reels.

She is pressing the breath out of me.

Did I want this?

Bitterly my mind races toward thoughts of last night.

I was drunk at the bar, trying to keep close tabs on my friend.

I was drunk, but he was even more so.

He was stumbling around,
making a nuisance of himself,
breathing beer and stale air on whomever he could lean
for a moment. Finally,

I panicked when I saw him lie down in a booth.

I knew he was going to pass out,
and I couldn't very well carry him out.

I remember stumbling over to the booth and grabbing him by the feet. I pulled.

I tried to wake him up.

It seemed pointless.

Three days earlier I had been at grandmother's house with my mother, cleaning out an old closet.

Grandmother was dead,
but there was some final tidying-up to accomplish.
Mother pulled out an old umbrella, shook it, said,
—Well, this is all that's left. She's gone now.

Amazingly, droplets of water seemed to fly off the end of the old umbrella.

Mom's eyes went wide in amazement.

—How could that be? It's like the thing's been recently used!

I didn't know how to answer,
but I had to go to the bathroom.

I went in and stood by the bathtub.

At first, I thought there were lobsters floating in the water.

Then I did a double take.

They were giant spiders...

Other Stuff Happened That Day, But This is All I Can Remember

He hits the ball across the parking lot.

Suddenly, a younger man

(I believe this to be his son)

steps forward,

dressed in exactly the same manner.

He is smaller, plumper, but could pass for an exact duplicate of the first golfer.

He takes his turn chipping the balls.

One flies across the parking lot.

Then a third man suddenly appears from nowhere.

He is dressed exactly as the first two,

and looks as if he might be the brother of the older man.

An uncle perhaps.

A dirty uncle.

He chips a golf ball.

Someone yawns.

I hear clapping in the crowd.

I walk out across the hot parking lot.

Somewhere, a dog is taking a shit on someone's lawn.

And this is another day.

They Explain to Me What They Want to Do.

Suddenly the clothes come off. I would have been terribly excited at the prospect of snuggling so many flabby tits, but then I am reminded of the ex-con lover, Mr. Baldy, Mr. Ham-fists, and I realize that this could get me killed.

She tries to convince me, tries to reason with me, does everything but rape me, but there is no way I can rise to this particular occasion. The whole thing ends on a sour note.

I guess I would be better off just fucking an alley cat
with a plastic revolver,
(squirting water out of my ass),
and daydreaming killer orgies
that never actually occur.
But that's just an illusion.

The Movie

ends with a woman whose face was stretched into a rictus of insanity, racing up the stone steps of an old keep, her arms outstretched.

She is laughing in terror,

and,

outside,

you see that a legion of soldiers has the place surrounded.

They are going to capture her.

Her protector passes her on the staircase.

The jig is up.

Later, he is shown walking to the —burning place,

a look of disgust on his face at the stench and smoke wafting up from the fire.

It could be 1568.

I wonder if she kept a familiar?

I wonder if it was a kitty cat?

So mother and I loaded up in the car,
and I had the directions written down right off the Net,
and we made it out to the place,
which was huge and ugly and decrepit and looked as if
it were big enough for twenty families.

I was excited.

I hadn't seen Miss K in many years.

She greeted me at the door,
but she seemed oddly distant, even in her effusive greet-
ing.

I immediately saw what lines the years had put in her
face,
how they had toughened the once sweet, but now aged
features,
until they stood out starkly
against eyes that still held a little of the old glitter.
Eyes that were fading, though.

—Oh, come in dear. Oh, my dear, it has been so
long since I saw you last, and we have so much catching
up to do. People change, you know.

I followed her short bustling frame through the
dimly-lit corridor,
and heard her voice come a winding down the walls of
time,
like a hollow echo of former days.
Her hair was done up in a little bun.

Inside,
I could see how old the place was,

even with the thin veneer of modernity put upon it; the walls and ceiling were cracked, the wallpaper was peeling and yellow, and the furniture was quite old.

Also, the place seemed to collect darkness (in pools and eddies of pitch that were quite unsettling).

I went into the kitchen first, followed her into the dining room, and then we went into a sort of parlor.

In there, various children (and what I supposed were members of her family) were sitting, talking excitedly amongst themselves.

One was a teenage girl with long, straight black hair, and she seemed to be playing games with the smaller children.

I wondered which children belonged to Miss K, and which were merely playmates visiting.

Miss K made me a cup of tea, and talked frantically, telling me about her job and her husband, and all the exciting things she had done in her nine years apart from me.

—I'm an adjunct professor you know. I have a lot of unmotivated students to deal with. But, I've had a lot of practice, raising a family the way I have.

—You seem to be getting on pretty well for yourself, I said lamely. I sat down at the kitchen table with my cup of tea, nursing the hot stuff in the palm of my hand.

—We get along okay. E is a supervisor now, so he gets a lot of extra hours. It's tough sometimes in this economy, to feed a family. But, luckily, we always seem to make ends meet. The good Lord will provide, as the book says.

—You always believed that, I said, again lamely.

—I still do. So, how have you been getting along?

Ah, there was the magic question:

How have YOU been getting along all these years, Null?
I didn't know what to say.

What could I possibly tell her?

That I was old and broken down and?

That I was, fundamentally, no better off than I had ever been before?

I felt a strong sense of embarrassment,
and I told her some tosh that I knew she didn't believe.

—I make some money...from my writing.

I lied. I had never made any real money from my writing,

and most probably never will.

It's my sorry fate to be a starving artist.

—Oh. Well. You always were a great writer. Written anything I might have read? Under an assumed name, maybe?

She started to laugh.

She had a very high, hollow voice, a sweet voice, musical tones.

And pretty hands; they looked as if they might have been carved from Ivory soap.

I didn't know what to say,
so quickly turned the topic of conversation to other things.
In the next room, the kids seemed to have quieted down.
I suppose the teenage girl was the babysitter
(it takes me awhile, sometimes, to figure out what should be most obvious).

She leaned over and kissed me.
I felt a hot flush.
My mother was sitting in the next room, talking to the children.

And this was a married woman.

—E wouldn't have liked me doing that. He get's
insanely jealous if another guy so much as looks at me.
But...that's for all the years spent apart. I've missed you,
she sighed, and took my hand.

Her hand was very cool and delicate, but my face suddenly felt hot.

I saw the image of her husband,
and suddenly felt like I was making him into a sort of
cuckold.

Also,

I knew he had a slumbering violence inside of him,

and I thought he might beat or kill me if he came home just then.

Did he ever beat her? I wondered.

I looked deeply into her face; the lines were cutting quite deep now into her graying features; she was no longer the young girl I had known nine years previously. Now she was a middle-aged woman, old and tired and spent with children and duties of home.

—E will just have to understand about today. C'mon. I'm going to take you out to dinner. It's on me. Red Lobster. Doesn't that sound delicious?

I agreed that it did.

I went and told my mother that Miss K would be bringing me home after dinner, and so Mother disappeared.

Just vanished.

Must have blown out the door before I could catch a glimpse of her leaving.

I'm not sure what happened to all the kids, either,

except the babysitter must have taken them to some other room in the giant old apartment house, because I saw them no more.

—This place is exactly like your old place. It's supposed to be haunted. I think it really is, too.

—It does look very old.

—It is. I bet it was built sometime around 1888. Maybe when Jack the Ripper was stalking London. What

do you think?

—I think you still seem a lot like the girl I use to know.

At that we fell into uncomfortable silence.

Going down the stairs was the difficult part.
They were very steep,
and seemed slippery,
and we had to hold onto the high stone balustrades to
keep from sliding down them,
which would have been nasty.

—Oh, these damn stairs scare the hell out of me.
It's the one thing I hate about living here. I go through
this every damn day.

At one point I actually expected her to get down
on her hands and knees
and start crawling down.

But we did make it down,
and to the car,
although I don't remember much about the drive.

We went inside.

I was aghast. I had never been in a restaurant like this
before.

One thing was for certain: it was NOT a Red Lobster.

—How can you afford a place like this?

I asked,
looking up at the cavernous ceiling
and the rows of polished glass doors that seemed to lead
to mysterious, secret rooms.

She looked back at me and said off-handedly,

—Oh, it's okay. E and I come here all the time.

—We find it very romantic.

—WE, I reminded her, —are not supposed to feel

romantic, Miss K. Just old friends visiting each other and having dinner, after too many years apart.

—I know, she giggled,
and for a moment,
beneath the seamed and aged face of the older woman,
I could see the gentle, wily skull of the young girl exposed in heathen wonder,
the skull that promised sensual pleasure, and promoted itself as something fine and fancy for the world to behold.

(In reality, she was a simple peasant girl from hill-billy stock. Same social background as myself.)

She put her hand gently to my chest,
stopped me from going forward,
said, —Wait.

She disappeared.
It was almost as if I were catastrophically drunk,
and time was skipping into little cut-ups.
One moment she was there,
the next moment she had disappeared into one of the welling pools of darkness that painted the heavy wooden floor.

When she reappeared,
she had on a long silver dress,
and I thought I must be dreaming.

—Well, do you like it? How do you like me now?
How do you like me...like me now?

It was almost as if I could hear those words echo in my skull.

I felt cold and clammy and sodden,
ashamed of my broken physical body,
my tawdry leather jacket, my old ball cap.

I was a pauper dating a princess,
one that happened to be —happily married for years.

How do you like me? Now?

It was a dangerous question.

I put my hand in my pocket.

An old cassette tape fell out.

It was *Gerogerigege*, a Japanese noise act.

It clattered to the floor, and she bent over in curiosity and picked it up.

—What's this? I can't even pronounce it.

—It's... Japanese experimental music. Experimental music is a big interest of mine these days.

—Oh, she said, not really understanding what I was talking about. We must have ordered food, because the next thing is that we were sitting in a sort of waiting room

that looked like a high school shop class,
but must have been one of those fancy art-deco dining rooms

because there was a flat screen hanging from the wall.

—Hey, they have the internet on this thing!

I took the remote and was busily trying to dial up YouTube.

I wanted to play a Boyd Rice video,
although now I can't remember exactly which one.

I think it was

—"Watery Leviathan,"

but it might more appropriately have been the rare track

—"People Change."

I looked back at where she was seated on a stool at a
wooden table,

with her legs kicked up.

To my horror,

she was smoking a cigarette.

—What in the world do you think you're doing? I
asked, putting down the remote and walking up to her.

She said,

innocently enough,

—What does it look like I'm doing? I'm smoking.

I was flabbergasted.

She had never smoked before.

I, myself, had smoked for years,
but had recently switched over to the e-cig, vapor cigarette,
as a safer alternative.

—Well, I figured since we were going to be to-
gether all day, I might as well smoke, since I assumed
you still did. But I guess you smoke the e-cig now, huh?

—Sure.

She went to get our food,
or check on our order,
and I was starting to get worried,
as she had been gone a long time.
I decided to go out into the labyrinthine hallways and
look for her.

But Which Doors to Try?

I saw some forms moving behind pebbled glass double doors,
and could hear the steady thump of pounding music.

I cautiously opened the door.
Inside, there was a band on a low stage,
belting out Eighties pop tunes.
They could have been Huey Lewis and the News, for all I knew,
because you could barely see them through all the colored lights and smoke of the fog machine.

People danced like zombies,
and I backed away slowly,
bumping into a massively tall woman in a long silver dress.

Her hair was done up in a massive coif.
I suddenly realized it was a student teacher I had known in high school, twenty years before.

She looked down at me with glazed eyes.
I wondered if she recognized me.
Curiously,
she didn't seem to be a day older than the last time I had seen her.

She said something unintelligible.
I think she was drunk.
She was snapping her fingers, and swaying stiffly to the

music.

I got the hell out of there.

I hope the meal was enjoyable,
because I don't remember a thing about it.
Later, we drove back to her apartment building,
and she must have invited me back in for coffee or
something,
because we had to face those same stone steps again.

I look down, and I can see the narrow space between the wall of the building,
which is brick,
and the steps themselves; narrow, but not so narrow
that someone couldn't fall into that space and become
trapped,
crushed.

The steps were a nightmare to climb up.
My feet kept slipping,
but I wasn't as afraid of falling as she was apparently,
because now I can see she has literally gotten down on
her hands and knees,
and is crawling up those rough stone steps.
I did a double take; I've never seen anything like it before or since.

She might as well have been wearing lengths of
chain,
she was straining so hard.
Oh, Miss K,
why did you leave me this way,

in the lurch, wondering after you,
as you putter away an existence in the comfortable cog
life

has prepared for you?

Are you suffering Miss K?

Can you make it up and down that staircase and into
the arms of that Other Man,
the one who stole your heart and the glamour in your
eyes?

Why should I care?

You're as alien to me as you ever were.

I'm defeated,

and spent,

and alone.

In the end,

I am Null.

So here I am crawling through the weeds,
watching this pulchritudinous beauty spread eagled across
the yellow line of a two-lane blacktop,
out in the middle of BFE.

On top of her,
some skinny pervert is pounding away,
and in the distance I hear the faint rumble of a truck,
so I make out this is some sort of suicide gig.
Like, maybe they find the prospect of being smashed
beneath eighteen massive wheels and dragged like squashed
bugs in a slimy trail of their own blood...

...erotic?

I don't know.

What do I know?

I am a lousy voyeur.

It is bright and dusty,
and suddenly I realize I've missed something because
both of them are walking across the field,
hand in hand, naked as the day God made them,
and they are both long,
pale specimens,
and I follow,
but at a discrete distance.

The wind is hot and smells like rotten eggs,
and the dust gets into your nostrils
and down your throat,
and gravel creeps into my shoes
and I feel dirty.

I come to an old weather-beaten house.
A shack, really, but it looks like some prefab domicile
full of roaches and bedbugs and whatnot.
The door looks like it is gonna fall off the hinges
it is leaning so crazy,
and the exterior has been so blasted by dust that the
very structure of the house looks as if it has been en-
gulfed by time.
It is dull and fleshless and like dinosaur bones picked
clean by the ages. But enough with that.

I go inside and discover a choking darkness.
It is hot and stale with bodies,
and I see a small living room that could hardly be called
that.

In there was a rumpled bed.
People are having sex on the bed.
I can barely make out their wasted images in the gloom.

I notice,
for the first time,

Several Large Dogs

They look like they have been drugged.

Otherwise, I would guess one of them would take a huge bite out of my ass.

Curiously, they are dressed in doggie tuxedos.

Some of them are asleep against the peeling walls.

A video camera rests on a tripod with no one to man it.

I fancy I can hear water running in another room,

so I creep past the dogs into the darkness

until I come to the door at the far end of the room.

I swing it open, and am amazed and revolted at my discovery.

Inside, a man that is the identical twin of the singer Tiny Tim is taking a shower in a large room that looks as if it belongs at the local YMCA.

He is rubbing soap across his fat, dripping body,

and is singing in a deep baritone

but I can't make out the words.

I think it was something about it being a long way to Tipperary.

I quickly shut the door on that.

No matter how dirty I felt,

it was gonna be a cold day in Hell before I ever got into a shower with that guy.

I walk back through the living room,

but the bed is now empty.

Dogs are wandering around out the door,
and through the crabby,
weed-choked yard,
shitting and pissing and picking at stray scraps and old
tin cans,
snouts buried in yawning trash bags,
and the road outside is still rumbling with those trucks,
and it is then that I see someone at the edge of the yard,
making triangles with the toes of an old shoe.

It was the summer when he visited the grandparents because the parents were fighting,
and wanted freedom,
and it was as good excuse as any to get rid of him, he reckoned.

He wasn't worried that they would get a divorce,
not yet anyway.

That long summer,
all he worried about mostly were old comic books,
television science fiction shows,
and soda pop.

Grandpa and Grandma's house always had a weird,
apple-like, cinnamon smell that masked an odor that
many suspected wafted up from the poor pipes.

Lousy sewer.

Everyone lives over a river of shit,
whether they realize it or not.

What was it William S. Burroughs once wrote about
not wanting to be president,
but —Commissioner of Sanitation,
or some such nonsense?

Grandpa and Grandma were distant figures.
Grandpa slept all day,
and Grandma emerged to bake cookies with her hair in
curlers
and her hose rolled down below her knees.
At night, they sat in the living room,

and Grandpa read the paper and Grandma looked at
the television,
but only softly.

Or,
sometimes,
they played old records.

The house was always spotless,
although he never saw Grandma do any cleaning.
Which, later, he thought of as peculiar.

The house was on the edge of a road where the
houses straggled off into the country.
An old cornfield grew across from their property,
in back of the neighbors' place,
and it was here that he was invariably drawn that long
summer,
for reasons he couldn't quite understand.

It seemed like there was mystery hidden in those end-
less stalks of old corn,
like every time he penetrated the brown, crisp stalks he
was walking into the heart of some secret labyrinth.
And he could sit behind the rows and lose himself.

But he knew he wasn't supposed to be in the neigh-
bors' yard.

He hadn't been specifically told about it,
but he got the impression the Stolzes were an odd cou-
ple.

They were as old (if not older) than his grandparents,

and both of them spoke with an accent that sounded faintly German, but was inscrutable nonetheless. He figured them to be a fruitcake and a nutbar, and Mrs. Stolz was always out in back, pulling weeds, whistling, and talking to herself. Her husband was rarely seen.

He couldn't remember exactly when it was he had first heard the whispering, but it hadn't really scared him. Not at first. At first, it merely puzzled him. He looked about for a source, but could find none.

He cautiously stammered out, —Who's there? There was no one there.

He continued to explore the old corn field.

He saw the shadow only a few days after that.
It seemed to be cast from the adjacent row,
as if someone was standing back there, hiding.
He gasped, got up, dust clinging to his bottom,
and wondered what on Earth to do.

He was quick to let curiosity overcome him.

He pushed back the stalks, said, —Hello? Any-
body there?

he then hopefully added, —Can we be friends?

He heard a faint rustling,
a faint whispering.

Then, the sun went behind a cloud, and all was silent.

Steve McCloud was a secret agent on a dangerous mission.

—Why do you watch such crap. Irene, why do you let the kid watch such crap on the television?

—He likes it. And this show is for families anyway.

Steve was hanging at the lounge,
all by himself,
waiting for his connection.
The Chinese man lurked in the shadows with a weapon
hidden under his trench coat.

Steve turned around,
smiled his toothsome shark smile,
and greeted him in High Mandarin.

A hand disappeared under a coat.
A blow gun.
The Chinese man brought the little tube to his lips,
puffed.

Steve put a hand to his neck.
He looked as if he was getting woozy.
There were spirals and circles erupting behind his eyelids,
and he fell over into a whirlpool of shadows,
a place where voices echoed out like dragging rubber.
The next moments disappeared into a thick fog.

A smiling woman held up a bottle of detergent.
Behind her, her husband bent over to inspect the kitchen sink.

Then, a hyperactive man in a suit with question marks told all about

—free government money. He yawned.

Steve woke up in a strange bed.

Above him, the beautiful Cruenta said,

—Well, well Mr. McCloud, it looks as if the effects of the drug have finally worn off!

Steve rubbed his head and sat up.

—Where am I? Is this where—

—Yes. No. I can't tell you. All I can say, for right now, is that the situation is under control. So, McCloud, we meet again after so many years. And under such unusual and difficult circumstances.

Steve hopped out of bed.

He wasn't wearing pajamas. He was dressed in an old T-shirt and a pair of boxer shorts.

Cruenta looked at him passionately, then fell into his arms.

—Oh Steve, Steve, why must we be enemies, just because our two countries are at war? Oh, if you only knew how many nights I have dreamed of you holding me like this.

Cruenta had an accent that was faintly Russian.

Steve said, —I know, baby. It's tough. The world wasn't made for lovers. But we've got to be tough. Got to be one step ahead of the game.

—Kiss me, you mad fool!

They kissed.

A football player sold chicken pot pies.

He nodded over on his arm.

When he came back
(from a place where he was being told not to pee on the floor),

Steve had cold-cocked some big, hulking guy,
stolen his gun,

and was standing in the foyer of some mansion,
holding the gun on some little bald man with a cane.
(He had to pee.)

—Okay Yuschenko, I want some answers, and I
want ‘em now!

The little bald man tittered,
smiled an evil smile revealing gold teeth,
and said,

—Yes, Mr. McCloud, you DO want answers. Many things
around here need answering. Well, I promise you, you
shall have your answers! You shall have them.

The next image was of an empty doorway.
The little bald man turned his face to the doorway and
called out something in some weird, guttural language.

Suddenly, he felt his eyes pop open WIDE.

A thing shambled through the doorway.

It was huge and green.

It was shaped a little like a turnip with legs.
It had one big eye in the center of its forehead,
and a beak with rows of needle-sharp teeth beneath.

What's more, it had a row of tentacles sticking out from its big, green, pulpy head.

It spoke the same guttural language, although it sounded like it was gurgling water while it was doing it.

The gun went off twice.

It didn't slow the thing down as it came through the door.

He felt his eyes grow wide.

Steve screamed.

It ate his head.

Suck plop!

Like it was a big, gory mess of candy.

But that couldn't be right
because the next scene Steve was running across what
looked like a tennis resort with a friendly agent.

They were being chased on foot.

He turned off the set.

—Time for dinner, Billy. You'll love it, I promise.
Chicken pot pie, fresh out of the oven.

—Best dinner for a growing boy, said Grandpa.

They sat down to eat,
and he did have to admit that Grandma's chicken pot
pie was delicious stuff.

It certainly hit the spot,
and kept on swinging.
He had almost two huge helpings,
and finished it off with ice cream.

Grandma said,

—Grandpa, I think we have a little pig on our hands
here. Oink, oink, oink...

Grandma began to make snooty sounds.

—Rosemary, stop it, said Grandpa, tilting back a
little and peering closely at the paper.

Grandma got up and collected the dishes.

—Billy, why don't you go out and play before it
gets too dark. You could use a little exercise after all
that food.

Billy wanted to do just that.
He pushed himself back from the table,
went to wash his hands,
and then headed out the back,
into the yard.

The shadows were growing longer as he walked to
the chain-link fence.

He could smell sweet hibiscus, and the scent of peppers
and fried food wafting down the street.

In the distance, houses gave way to old fields,
and, above,
the sky was an orange temple of sunset.

Things were picture perfect.

He went out of the gate,
and walked across the edge of the Stolzes' property and
into the thick of the field.

He could hear it suddenly,

The Whispering on the Wind.

He stepped into the field.
He began to walk slowly forward,
saying his name,
singing,
asking if anyone was there,
trying to fight down the weird,
creeping sense of otherness that was pervading his being.

He felt his body tremble in the wind.

He walked slowly,
his feet creeping across the grit.
There—he fancied he could hear it say his name!

Billy! Billy! Come to me!

Had it really said those words?

He wasn't sure.

It was such a whispering,
murmuring sound,
his ears could be deceiving him; it could have said anything.

He walked ahead a few paces,
feeling the old dry stalks husk against his shoulders.
And there it was!

The Shadow

Someone was hiding in the corn!

He suddenly rushed forward,

dove into the next row,

put his hands out...and touched nothing.

He looked around, confused.

Then, the sky overhead seemed to darken.

He looked up.

He saw the smile of a shark.

Twin eyes of deep cobalt blue stared into his own, from a raggedy head wisped in white.

The man was wearing what appeared to be old, ragged clothing.

His jaw was prominent, his forehead large and round, and he was going bald.

He was the skinniest, weirdest guy that he had ever seen.

—Hello there. I've seen you playing around here. Why don't you come with me, and we can play together?

The man put his large-knuckled hands on his hips. His grin seemed to be fixed to his face as if painted there by a cruel joke of a god.

The wind blew his old, frayed jacket about his tall, gangling frame.

—I don't think so, mister, he said.

—I'm not supposed to go with strangers.

He backed up; he could feel his heels twist clumsily in the dirt.

The man laughed.

—Oh, I'm no stranger, Billy. We've known each other, oh, a long time. But you were very young then, and you don't remember.

He backed up a little, looked around.

They seemed so alone out here,
and it was as if time had stopped.

There was no sound coming from any of the nearby animals.

Not so much as a dog barking.

The man cast a long shadow across Billy's form.

—Say, do you live out here or something?

The man said,

—Or...something. The Stolzes know about me. As a matter of fact, they're the ones who invited me in. It's not my custom to go where I'm not wanted. But c'mon, Billy, we have to get going if we're going to go and play; the hour is growing late, and the barrier can only be crossed when it's thinnest...now is the time.

And the man turned, and strode off into the brown husks.

And, despite his fear, Billy followed.

He felt Mr. Stolz grab his shoulder, jerking him awake.

—You little snoop! What are you doing out here?

Billy felt his head clear slowly.

Then his vision came back from blurry,
sharpening to a crystal clarity that almost made it seem
as if he had been looking out through a thick fog.

—You're the Johnson boy, aren't you? From next
door?

—Well, I'll teach you to snoop around on other people's
property!

—We'll just see what your grandpa and grandma have
to say about this.

And with that Billy felt himself jerked out of the
field

and across the yard

toward the backdoor of his grandparents' house.

He suddenly noticed something odd:

he was soaked from head to toe.

After much fretting and fuming,
Billy was put to bed.

Upstairs,
he felt a case of the sniffles coming on,
probably from being wet out in the cold.

It didn't bother him.

His mind was a million light years away.

He remembered the man with the electric blue eyes.
The man in the corn.

He closed his eyes.
He could still see the man clearly.

Tall, skinny,
skull a little too big,
eyes a little too bright.
Billy rolled over on his side.

The man seemed to have grown weight.
Billy approached him in the corn,
while the man seemed to be fighting some kind of agi-
tated battle with his own body.
He was grabbing at his coat,
which seemed to be moving and bulging in strange ways.
Billy crept forward.

The man turned.
He opened his coat and groaned,
as if freeing himself from a great weight.
Billy screamed.

Hundreds of large rats fell out from under his coat.
They dropped in piles around his feet,
squealing and scurrying in all directions.

The man's eyes flamed into red.
His face now seemed the very face of a skull.
His teeth were little rat-like fangs.

—Billy! C'mon. It's playtime. Matter of fact, it's
heaven in here, and we have all of eternity.

Billy could hear something crash through the stalks,
saw a brown, humped shape obscured by husks of corn.
He suddenly knew that this was a rat,
the biggest rat in the world,
and the hungriest.
He turned, but his feet seemed glued to the spot.

The scream brought Grandma upstairs,
but he was more concerned with what was going on below,
outside his window,
than reassuring her.

She tucked him in, and he was compliant.
He pretended as if he intended to go back to sleep.
As soon as she had shut the door, he bolted up in bed
and went to the window.
Outside, in the darkness, he could see a flashlight bobbing up and down in the corn.
Old Man Stolz was out there for some reason,
looking for something.

Billy could feel his pulse race.

He found himself walking out the back door.
The moon was a sickle-shaped sword in the sky,
and there seemed to be no stars.
He could hear the cicadas chirp,
hear the rustle of the trees as the gentle breeze of evening
played through their branches.
Ahead, as he made his way into the corn,
he could see that flashlight still bobbing up and down.
What was the old man looking for?

He could hear the old man muttering to himself,
cursing; he could hear foul words float over to him on
the gentle breeze.

He didn't understand some of these words,
but he knew they were bad.

They made him feel slightly icky,
(like when he caught Mommy and Daddy using them
against each other). He crouched low behind some corn
stalks,

watching the flashing light bob up and down in the rows.

Suddenly,
he heard the Stolzes' back door swing open and shut.
Mrs. Stolz stood out on the back porch with her arms
folded across her chest.

In the corner of her mouth smoldered a cigarette.
He could smell the smoke come wafting over to him on
the breeze.

At first she spoke to him in her faintly German
accent,
words Billy could just barely make out.
Then she totally surprised him.

She spoke in the weird, gurgling language he had
heard on the television show.

Or in his dreams.

He wasn't sure which.

She came off the porch steps and stood in the yard,
her arms still folded,

looking out over the corn field as the flashlight bobbed
up and down, and her husband made his way through
the stalks.

Billy could feel his heart pump icily.

If he were discovered here...

Suddenly,

the wind seemed to pick up a little bit.
It blew dust and old leaves into a little whirling eddy,
as Billy could suddenly feel electricity in the air.

His skin began to prickle.

Mrs. Stolz stamped her cigarette out in the dirt,
swayed a little on her feet,
and then put her arms up,
as if pushing back against an invisible force.
Her eyes seemed to close to slits,
and she began to murmur something in the strange language.

Suddenly, Billy saw what he at first took to be fireflies
dancing around Mrs. Stolz's arms.

But they weren't fireflies.

They were little blue sparks.

Billy felt his skin began to prickle and crackle,
and his hair seemed to be standing on end.

The wind picked up to a gale,
the stalks started blowing out of the dry ground,
wrenched up into the air,
and Billy suddenly felt as if he were in the heart of a
miniature twister.

Mr. Stolz walked over into the row where Billy was
hiding.

Suddenly,

Billy felt the flashlight beam illuminate his shadowy
form.

—You! he cried.

—What are you doing here? Oh, you've got to get out of here, boy, you don't know what kind of danger you're in! Why, turn the wrong corner here and...

He suddenly came forward,
put his hand on Billy's shoulder,
and jerked him toward him.
Behind them, in the yard, Mrs. Stolz had worked herself
up into an ecstasy of gibberish chanting,
her arms still raised,
her face a red,
swelling,
sweating mess.
Her eyes were watery squints,
spilling tears,
and she looked as if she were on the verge of some kind
of mad ecstasy.

The wind was now a howling tempest.
Bright flashes of blue spark began to shoot through the
sky around them, and Billy struggled to get free of the
old man's grasp.

—Let me go, you old bastard!
Billy was surprised to hear himself curse,
but the intensity of the moment seemed to demand it.
The old man cursed himself,
then let the boy go.
He turned,

the beam of his flashlight suddenly falling on a large, humped shape that had appeared moving through the dry husks.

The old man turned,
yelled out:

—Run, boy! Run!

They did,
the old man trailing Billy as the great,
humped shape crashed through the corn stalks,
knocking them over.

It was a shambling thing in the darkness,
but Billy felt he knew what it might be
...if he could see it clearly.

But, even daring to glance over his shoulder,
he realized there was no seeing it clearly; it seemed to
be a shifting of shadow and moonlight which hovered,
just barely, on the edge of taking shape.

It was a few moments before they were out of the
corn.

Mr. Stolz walked up to his wife and took her hand.
Billy hunkered down at the far side of the yard,
too scared to get much closer,
and watched as the great hulking shape came out of the
corn.

It was unmistakably a rat,
the biggest rat he had ever seen.

It looked to be roughly the size of a young calf.

It suddenly stood up on its hind legs,

its arms grasping at nothing,
and before his astounded eyes,
Billy saw the rat transform.

It seemed to melt into itself,
becoming smaller and smaller until it wore the final
form of a man.

It was the raggedy stranger he had met the previous day.

But the face was different,
seeming somehow unformed,
or unshaped.

It flowed like wet clay across the skull,
and from the mouth came a sad mewling.
But the eyes were still twin coals of red and seemed to
glow from within.

It tottered forward drunkenly,
held out a hand as if to say
—Pleased to make your acquaintance,
and then turned,
heading back toward the corn.
Suddenly,
from its shoulders,
a shower of crisp,
brittle leaves began to blow in the wind,
covering the yard in the howling gale.
Billy rubbed his eyes; the man seemed to be disappear-
ing in a shower of twisting leaves.

The Stolzes were still holding hands,
and seemed to be praying.

Suddenly,

Billy could hear his grandma calling from the back porch.

Calling him inside,

where all was safe and warm.

He suddenly knew he had to run.

There was something chasing him.

He couldn't quite see it,

but he knew it was behind him

He took off across the yard,

bolted up the steps,

into the back,

past Grandma,

and up the stairs.

He ran inside,

slammed the door,

dove into bed,

and twisted his face up under the covers.

He could hear movement downstairs,

and then the heavy tread of feet on the stairs.

Then,

it seemed as if he could hear a screeching howl

the likes of which he had never heard before in his life.

It sounded like the howl of an angry animal.

There was a monstrous thump against the door,

and he could hear the creaking and splintering of the wood

as something hammered itself against the jamb.

He thought he knew what it might be.
The question was:
Could anything stop it?

He Reached Up and Switched the Channel

The reception was poor.

He rolled over in bed.

The TV was blaring.

Grandpa was watching the morning news.

He didn't have a TV in his room.

So this was only a dream then.

So the rat-thing wasn't real either,

even as it stalked around the room, smoke blowing from
its snout

—it wasn't real.

It tripped over furniture,

and had torn a seat to fluffy, cottony shreds,

—but it wasn't real.

Grandma was coming up the stairs.

Below, he could hear the sounds of someone downstairs.

Sounded like they were munching breakfast.

Probably the Stolzes.

(They were, after all, his parents, weren't they?)

The rat-thing eyed him with beady black orbs.

Thin streamers of saliva dripped down from its razor-
sharp teeth.

Billy remembered Steve McCloud's head disappearing
down the gullet of an awful alien thing with tentacles
and one eye.

He was glad such things couldn't exist in real life.

He put out his hand.

He stroked the fur.

He wondered.

In time,
he screamed
until the rafters shook with the delightful fury
of his frenzied pleas.

It is a Young Woman,

I see,

and her hair is one spider web mess,

and her body is rail-thin,

and her dress looks as old and worn and dusty and tattered as I feel.

She turns, looks startled, eyes me warily,

and puts her hands to her mouth.

She could almost be blowing me kisses.

Her eyes are twin moons of suffering and want.

I hear her begin to gabble.

It is unintelligible.

She pats her skinny little fingers against her mouth.

All of a sudden, I realized what was wrong here.

They had cut out her tongue.

Sitting in a crowded room at a party.
On the wall I've posted some pictures.
Told the story a thousand times.
UFOs flying over so I draw.
The faces are all smooth and beautiful.
Alone I am trying to explain my music.

—It's an abstract mass. Random nothingness shifted
out into the audio void. A real statement.

They think that it is bullshit.
And you know what?
They are probably right.

The house right now is filthy.
It's a basement.
Crawlspaces leading off into corridors,
floors sinking into the shit of the earth,
brutal fingers reclaiming what once was a spot humans
could inhabit.

No more dreams, say I,
and turn back to my workstation.
It's an audio workstation of worrisome cables and little
boxes.

No one knows what's going on.
Someone mills about with a beer.
I think it is the tall blonde boy that sings in the rock
band.

I get up to walk up the stairs,

out of the basement,
but there are boxes and shit on the stairs,
and people sleeping there like it is fucking Soylent Green,
so I have to make my way carefully.
Up, and up I go.
Outside, into the hall.
Wonder why everything is so subterranean.

Guy rolls over in bed.
I am suddenly in a room.
He is an old friend.
Lousy lump under the quilt.
The room is awash in flying dust motes of sunlight,
little eddying pools of darkness,
but he is a painted frenzy of bright,
psychopathic intent.
I am stunned to speechlessness.

Gun In His Hand

—I want to take that away from you. Please.

I feel like this is a huge imposition on our former friendship.

He sits up.

He has grown immense breasts since the last time I saw him.

His head is covered in a white kerchief do rag,
makes him look like Jean-Paul Marat.

I take the gun.

He smiles.

I pass out of the room in silence.

The hallway is dark.

The gun disappears down the front of my pants.

But this is no mystery to me.

 Last night I had a dream,

I remember,

as I try to circumnavigate the weird contours of this occult building. (How in the hell did I get here?)

 In the dream,

I was living in a dormitory-style room with a bunch of sexy girls.

Or, at least, that's what I took them to be.

We were all watching hockey or soccer,

I can't remember which.

I am reclining on a bed against the wall.

It's a small bed.

a female professor comes in.

She lies down beside me.

She begins to rub her hands on my legs,

and I feel myself getting turned on.

Hockey goes on and on and is a dull game;

the British call soccer —football,

but it is still only soccer.

Which reminds me.

Luke got out of the cab.
He looked at the address on his slip of paper.
Yes, he thought,
I've come to the right place.
Around him,
traffic continued to hum and thrull,
and daylight slanted down in eddying arcs of brightness
mixed with dust, exhaust, and the peculiar flying grit
that penetrates your lungs
when you breathe cotton like a fish in the summertime.
Someone rumbled a dull fart of a horn blast,
and a trucker thought to himself, —Yes, she looks like
she would do nicely. Tie her up, make her suck it. She
would like to suck it.
Below him, stashed under the seat, are half-a-dozen
crusty fuck mags.

Girls walk by in auras of innocence.
Kids pedal bikes into the flaccid breeze.
I was never here,
but Luke told me about it.

The walk is cracked leading up to the door.
On each side,
roses and crab grass shoot like little withered dwarfs of
vegetation that God somehow misplaced when he was
making the rounds.
So nasty.
Yard is strictly run-to-riot, a nonsense tableaux of weeds
and broken toys,

plastic Nerf balls and bits of this and that; beer bottles
glint in sunshine sparkle, sending out white hot points
of fire.

Bees buzz around Luke's head.

He walks up the steps,
walks down the cracked cement.
Some idiot bastard child has sketched a fractured hop-
scotch sketch,
like a puzzled Chinese ideogram
upon the walk.

Little feet pounced here clutching pebbles in the boil-
ing breeze,
long ago.

Jump ropes scattered on the porch.
He walks up creaking wood to the front door.
Jesus peers at him from beyond the rusted screen.

He pulls open the door.

It has been long months since last he saw Clem.
It was at the institution,
where Clem was a fellow inmate.
Both of them got along well enough.
Then they became fast friends,
Clem leading Luke in little mind games,
dragging him around the maze

of his own speculations and philosophical meander-
ings. Clem would sit back,
lace his hands behind his head and say,

—Well, Luke old bean, what do you think of that? What do you think of that, eh? Does that sort of speculation tickle your fancy?

And Luke,
who was obsessed with philosophical meandering and
Derrida,
and post-structuralism,
and deconstructionism,
and probably some other stifling,
muddy thinking pushed out by Frankfurt School Marx-
ists,
would lean over the cracked plastic table,

what had scratches and scrawls and doodles of mad little
faces on it, and just stare at Clem,
like he had never seen anything quite so strange and
wonderful in all of his life.
And maybe he hadn't.

And so the two of them created a sort of meeting
of the minds.

And conversations around the card table went on long
after the other patients had gone to bed.

Out during Rec Time,
when Clem would stand there with his curly,
sandy hair blowing in the hot breeze
and a cigarette hanging out of his weird,
fish-like lips,
he would expound upon his philosophies.

Luke was always an attentive listener.

—Now I don't believe for a moment anyone actually ever believes they are going to die,
he would say as beyond the wall,
trucks and busses rumblyfarted by in the distance. The
Head Nurse would scratch
cryptic pyramids
in the sand
with her white shoe point.

—Won't happen. Suppose I am a solipsist, Luke.
—Are you real? Only in the confines of my imaginings.
The mind is simply a sender-receiver, nothing more. We
just aren't sure yet who is doing the broadcasting.

Clem looked up,
his face shaded partly by the shaking branches of an old
tree overlooking the patio.
Patients milled around in drugged and bored apathy.
Minutes fell like a sledgehammer thump
upon the skull of the world.

—God, I suppose, Clem.
—God is the sender.
—We simply decode the signals.

Clem looked off into the distance.
In the distance,
two men in orange vests were laying down a number of
traffic cones. The smell of hot tarmac competed with
burning cigarette in the stifling air.

—Yes. But he's a cruel bastard, isn't he?

Luke realized he loved Clem,
a little.

They corresponded by mail a few times,
but it seemed a rather dull alternative to the conversations.

Clem expounded upon
God,
death,
the nature of time,
Dreams

...Luke took it all in silently,
responding as best as his limited knowledge would permit.

Days turned into months.

Luke's mother was ill.

Died.

He moved into the halfway house.

He learned to cook meals.

There was no one to speak with,
no one to pry open the vistas of his mind.

There were a number of mentally-impaired who slopped
dinner down their chests.

A girl crawled on the floor.

Chester, a very lazy, large boy stuffed full of psychiatric
medication, often fell asleep outside on the lawn.

His huge bulk was usually shaded by a pathetic tree.

Luke was detached.

Disconnected.

His mind was empty.

What had ever convinced him to seek out anything beyond himself?

The world was what it was; it smelled of disinfectant, dirty ass, and the musty funk of crooked hallways. Darkness impeded and perverted his sense of self. He was withering on the vine, tuning out.

So he no longer felt,
no longer thought.

Vague impressions and hints of possibility disappeared, just as questions of meaning and time became irrelevant.

There was no time;
there was a steady stream of dishes to do.

But he often thought of noble Clem,
with his sandy, curly long hair, and his tall, gangly figure,
who knew so much and talked so plainly
and yet whose mere questions resonated like music,
infuriated and bothered Luke,
who had never had his mind picked apart by anyone
save his psychiatrist.
So.

He knew Clem was supposed to be living here.

He had gotten the address
by hook and by crook,
but he had finally tracked him down.

He wanted to resume his short-lived friendship.

He started to knock on the screen.

His hand froze mid-way in the air.

Suppose Clem answered?

After so much time had passed,
what could he possibly have to say to him? Would Clem
even remember him?

Luke had always been the silent one,
the cold, aloof one,
unsure of how to process Clem,
or even how to respond to his exhortations to
—break free from the weak, pathetic ennui— that gripped
Luke's life like a vice.

A horsefly landed on his fist; the cabbie was snoozing
in the road. Someone somewhere was playing godawful
rap bass.

He knocked at the rickety screen.

Little wonder the thing didn't just come off its hinges.

As it was, it was hanging by crooked,
rusted threads across the face of the battered wooden
door.

Inside,
a heavy funk of mildew.

Darkness.

Nobody home, then?

He waited dull seconds,
ticking into a full minute.

The cabbie,
a withered man in a ball cap,
would eventually become impatient.
Luke wondered what would transpire in the next few
minutes.

He could hear creeping in the gloom.
The creak of footfalls pounding on old, loose floor boards.
The whining cringe of the door being drawn back,
seconds after the clink of a falling chain; the rattle of a
loose handle, the click of a dead bolt...

An old woman,
a toothless crone in a rumpled polyester dress.
Bored eyes like dull pinpoints of black boiled hate and
apathy; loose shitty curls of grey hair ringed a dusty,
creased face,
with dust caught in the withered folds.
One arm up on the doorjamb she leaned,
her large,
droopy visage eyeing Luke warily.

Long minutes.
Clock ticking.
Horse fly buzzing.
Stranded in a macabre moment of dream-like resonance,
Luke could barely spit out the words he wanted to say.
They were caught in his throat like a bone,

choking the sensibilities out of him
until he felt quite dizzy with fear and apprehension.

Finally he managed.

—Clem? Is he here?

The woman turned,
cast her head back off into the stifling darkness,
seemed to work her toothless maw for a moment,
and spoke to someone who might as well have been invisible.

—No. No Clem here.

Pause.

—You must have the wrong house.

Luke paused,
unsure of how to proceed,
lifted the paper up to his face,
and said,

—No, no I'm certain of it. This is the right house...right address. I was told that Clem Johansen lived here as a tenant.

The woman smiled, moved her crochety old head back and forth like a slow, mesmerized cobra, and said,
—No. No Clem here. Not for a long time. He left two weeks arrears in rent. Left all of his stuff, too. What I couldn't sell is in a closet downstairs here. Want to come in and take a look?

As an afterthought she added,

—Friend of yours?

Luke said more confidently,

—Yes. An old friend. Haven't seen him in awhile. Do you know where he went?

The old woman smiled again,
exposing black gums in a blackened mouth.

Licorice-colored orifice.

She seemed bothered but amused in equal measure.

—No idea and don't care. Lazy alcoholic bum.
Come on in, he left a few things. I'd of thrown 'em out,
but I must have known you'd be coming. Or someone
like you.

She turned and Luke followed into the large foyer,
which smelled of mildew,
and creaked and groaned under the feet,
and was choked with dust.

The floor was a litter of broken children's toys
and discarded rubbish.

Furniture was badly out of place.

Elvis peered in black velvet relief
from the wall overlooking the sagging couch.

A single television was churning out a combination of
fuzzy static and game shows.

All was.

The closet.

Luke opened up the rickety door,
his hand squeezing the rusty handle lightly,
not liking the boney wobble of it,
pulling back the heavy wood,
which seemed to catch against the floor

and scrape long and hideous.
Inside a pack and a pink blanket.
Luke went inside and grabbed eagerly.
The old woman disappeared.

 The pack was full of a few old books,
Heidegger and Nietzsche
and an almanac and a few thriller paperbacks.
Nothing special.

He dug deeper
and found filthy shirts and under things,
old candy wrappers,
a deck of pornographic playing cards,
a bandanna,
a buck knife,
a headband with feathers and beads on it,
and a pair of work gloves.

He discarded all of this on the floor.

He found a necklace,
a cheap little twisted thing that had a sort of rusted
pig-shaped piece of metal hanging by a beaded thong,
and stuffed it in his pocket.

He had no idea what it meant.

 Then he found the photographs.

 People posed in various erotic shots; mother, sis-
ter, fellatio, cunnilingus,
people fucking on roller skates,
people doing it perched precariously on the edge of toi-
lets

and leaning into urinals,
and sitting on sinks
and down on all fours with strings of beads shoved up
their asses.

He flipped through them,
feeling his breath suck in a little.

There were phony bondage shots,
bored women tied with handkerchiefs and leather belts,
standing in black lace panties
in empty rooms,
while men whose faces were cleverly hidden from the
camera

prodded at them with riding crops and whips.

Some of the women had clearly been crying; a few of
them looked bored,
their flabby bodies painted in stark relief
by the gritty black and white images.

Intermixed were quite banal scenes
of a family at picnic.

Mom and dad and sis and,
perhaps,
Little Clem,
from decades ago.

A few grainy images,
perhaps thirty years old.

He pocketed all the photographs.

The old woman shuffled out of the darkness,
pointed her fingers,

snapped a few times,
and said, in an accusing voice,
—Here now, you’ve made a mess. Pick it up. Come on,
pick it up. Here, I’ll get you a bag.

 In truth,
the whole place looked as if a cyclone had just ripped
through it,
but Luke knew better than to protest.
He got up, felt his knees popping,
and bent over,
taking the garbage sack from the old woman
and stuffing the heaped contents on the floor into the
plastic opening.

 He had quite a Santa Claus sack once he was done.
He slung it over his shoulder.
The old woman stopped to look at him in the gloom of
the living room, as if to consider for a moment what he
was doing here and who he was,
and then turned,
cast her eyes to the floor,
and lead him out, saying,
—Well, sorry I couldn’t be of more help to you, but I’m
an old woman, and I just can’t keep up on the coming
and going of tenants. I’m eighty years old this year.

 Luke apologized for any inconvenience,
and stepped back out into the heat.
The cabbie was still waiting at the curb.
Somewhere,

a car alarm had started wailing out terror to the bored, apathetic streets.

He got in the cab with his sack,
looked at the address,
crumpled and folded in his hand,
and slowly began to tear it into pieces.
Suddenly, he realized he would never see Clem again,
that Clem might well be dead,
that, for all intents and purposes,
he WAS dead.

No connection.
No more conversation.
No more mental touch.

Tears began to roll down his cheeks,
The cabbie looked back in his rearview mirror,
never once changed expression,
continued his bored driving
with a face that might as well have been molded from plastic.
Luke began to sob violently.

When he got back to his flat he turned on a White-house album, possibly cranking the volume far too loud.
He felt cold,
alien,
lizard-like.

He was in a place where emotion couldn't reach him; he had exhausted that avenue.

He sat in his chair and lit up the end of a joint.

After a few hours, he disappeared in folds of electronic noise,

his alien self covered by a harsh wall of icy sound, allowing no light to pierce through.

He sat down in his rocker, the room spinning a little.

He closed his eyes. Behind the closed lids, images danced: erotic and playful and hideous and murderous and full of cold, sadistic glee.

Killing the center of himself that needed anything but freeze.

He slumped over in the chair, put his head between his legs,

and,

were it not for the marijuana buzz,

might

have vomited.

He could hear the clock tick, loudly.

And so he sat until the room grew very dark.

It is dark where I am at.
There is a fenced-in run,
a gravel and dirt path running between two chain-links
topped by barbed wire.
On either side,
a house leans crazily over,
spilling out into the yard.
The wall on either side has been ripped out,
so you can see directly into the living room.
Someone,
a mysterious stranger,
hands me a microphone.

—Tell them, Null, tell them all about the money
scam and the Federal Reserve.

I proceed to do this,
and realize I am talking to a bored group of twenty-
something college dropouts,
all adorned in baggy clothing and flannel shirts.
One of them is the tall, blonde boy in the rock band.
Apparently, no one wants to hear what I have to say,
as they all run through the opening in the fence
and hide out in a living room.

I told you,
one side of one house is open,
wall torn down,
facing the opposite house in the same condition.

So I follow.
Microphone in hand.

Bored eyes stare at me blearily across haze of marijuana smoke.

—They print up the money, but there is nothing backing it. They want to create economic boom times, they simply flood the economy with phony greenbacks. They want to create economic busts, they take all that money out of circulation. Big deal, Like it grows on trees, right? No more real than anything else in this phony world.

My voice is scratchy,
and it sounds like I am broadcasting across time and space

through the oldest Mexican radio in the world.

I realize my captive audience is asleep.

They struggle against each other in bored derision,
a jumbled knot of twenty-something men and women
lying across couches and sofas and sprawled out drunk-
enly across wooden floors.

Party house,
and everyone is passed out.

I realize my lecture on the Fed will have to wait.

I go back out,
step across the opening in the fence,
walk out onto the dirt run,
and am met by the Sheriff.

Tough guy.

Hamhock fists and swollen belly,
brown uniform and porn star moustache over bitter lit-

tle teeth.

Chews tobacco, obviously.

He says nothing intelligible.

Or, at least, nothing I can remember later.

His big imposing bulk fills the night with flying bits of gravel,

as he jumps up and down,

like a moon man, his arms held stiffly out at his sides,
his face a comic mask of anger; he looks like a hopping
mad little boiler about to discharge a heavy jet of steam
from his ears.

One of his shadowy cohorts,
who hides in the background drinking beer,
asks him what he is doing.

He replies,

—I'm demonstrating my interrogation techniques.

I swear to God, that's all I remember.

I leave him to jumping in the dirt,
realizing he is a rowdy character.
I go back through the opening in the fence,
into the living room,
past the lotus-eaters,
and down the hall,
getting lost in the maze-like shadows and interplay of
old doorways and little nooks
and crannies that end in nothing.

In a room
a man and a woman make love.

Dirty room,
little bed with rumpled, filthy sheets.
The woman has a wonderful body,
which I at first think is painted white.
She looks up at me,
rolls off of him,
and her eyes are pinpoints of solid black.
I do not understand.
Her head is bald,
smooth, and she has no nipples.
She is chalk white.

And smooth between the legs.

She has long fingernails.

She starts to rip her pearly white skin off in massive
hanging chunks.

I can see the dry flaps of it hanging from her,
as if she were simply some sort of bizarre snake
shedding for the first time.

Bloody scars criss-cross her arms,
and she becomes a mass of oozing red and white.

—Do you like me? Do you see what they've done
to me? Do you like me better this way, or the other?

She was covered in white latex,
some sort of skin suit.

I shake my head,
thinking this isn't possible,
that I must be back with the lotus-eaters, dreaming.
The bed becomes a sodden mass

of blood and white skin,
as she continues to shred her outer layer,
revealing a blood-streaked torso even more lovely than
what I first imagined.

Slowly,
I drift out of the room,
back down the stairs,
tearing my crummy pictures off the wall.
So I end up where I started,
sitting in a chair,
losing consciousness,
becoming a fly on the wall.

He looked up and down the expanse of beach as the waves continued to crash against the water.

—Hey, Lucy. Hey, get up already.

She was laid out on the sand.

Fred and Ethel were debating on whether or not to try and scale the expanse of cliff that towered overhead, or look for a way around it, even though it would entail a hell of a long walk.

Some seagulls sailed overhead in a lazy blue expanse that was quickly darkening down to grey.

The air seemed alive with the possibility of a storm.

Lucy rolled over,
sand sticking to her face,
her clothes a sodden mess, and said,
—Leave me the hell alone, you bastard. This is all...all your damn fault.

—To hell with you, bitch. You always were bad luck.

Ricky put out a foot,
not gingerly,
to roll Lucy over.
She looked about half-dead from hunger and thirst.

—Get up, you bitch, we have to keep moving.
—I don't give a damn whose fault it is, anyway. Why do you? You some kind of Goddamned soothsayer or something?

—You're a penis with legs.

—You're a lame, bitchy cunt. Now get up.

Lucy slowly got to her feet.
She wobbled a bit,
made tracks in the sand as she staggered like a drunk,
trying to regain her sense of equilibrium.
Ricky put his fists on his hips,
mainly to keep from belting her across the face and
knocking her back down.

Fred and Ethel both crouched by the life boat,
seemingly waiting for a rescue that was quite obviously
never going to come.
They both seemed dazed,
unconscious of the seriousness of the situation.
As in: they needed to find fresh water and food,
and quickly.

Ricky,
of course,
felt as if he were the only one capable under the circum-
stances.

—We have to find some fresh water. We're gonna
die of thirst out here if we don't.

Fred suddenly called out,
weakly, —Rick? Rick, are all our emergency supplies
gone?

Ricky looked over at him as if he might have been
a monstrously slow child.
Of damn well course they were all gone; used up days
ago.

Ricky's mouth felt like a swab of cotton, but he managed to croak,

—Yes, Fred. No more food in the kit. We rationed out the last of it before we landed on this godforsaken rock.

Fred managed to look even more downcast and woebegone than he already had,
and lowered his head,

as if in prayer.

Ethel absentmindedly stroked his white, wispy locks.

She seemed as if she were the only one prepared,
willing and able,

to meet death on its own terms.

She shushed Fred as he began to weep.

Lucy blinked as if she were just coming back to consciousness.

She staggered drunkenly,

wobbling on her feet,

and then managed to spit out,

blinking unbelievably as if she was seeing a mirage,

—It's always the women...always the women who have to be the strong ones. Rick, you bastard...

She turned on him,

her bleary eyes boiling down to pinpoints of red and black,

and said,

—Why are you all so weak, huh? Why are all men...so...fucking...

she suddenly stumbled forward, hit his chest, began to pound him with her tiny fist.

He grabbed her hands in his, looked at her,
felt his jaw harden with murderous hate.

He pushed her back,
but she didn't fall,
only stood there in a rigid pose that suggested the killer
feline waiting to pounce.

He suddenly doubled up his fist and punched her in the
gut.

—Oh hey, Ricky, why'd you go and do a thing like
that for?

Ethel's tones seemed curiously flat and hollow.
She must have realized that,
at death's door,
all other events and considerations start to pale in im-
portance.

Fred merely seemed confused.

Ricky went over, pulled her back up by the collar
of her white shirt, and told her,
—Calm the hell down, bitch. You're not making this
any easier for anyone, okay?

She looked at him with sullen,
guilty,
schoolgirl eyes.
The punch didn't do much to even knock the wind out
of her.

—It's that damn sea wall or cliff or whatever. We've got to get over that somehow.

Rick put his hands on his hips and considered. He turned and looked East; he looked West.

Fred said,

in his own croaking,

half-dying-of-thirst manner,

—Jeez, Rick, how in the world you ever gonna get over that thing, anyhow? It must be a hundred feet high.

Ethel stared blankly off into space, not really looking directly at anything.

Lucy suddenly sprang to life,

pointed her skinny, quivering finger,

and said,

—And it goes on for miles, all the way as far as the eye can see in both directions...and ain't nobody got the strength to walk nor climb...

She began to breathe hard,

her nose curling up and her chest heaving up and down like the ocean slowly churning behind them,

and she continued with,

—And you know what...it's that sonofabitch what got us into this mess to begin with. Him and his damn boat, his sex toy...yeah.

—Shut up, bitch.

—You think I don't know how many girls you screwed on that damn boat? You think I don't know you fuck anyone that touches you? Think I can't smell the per-

fume and I don't see the lipstick on the collar? A wife knows these things, God damn it. You and you're fucking boat. Get us all killed

—We're already dead.

—Shut up bitch!

—And this is Hell...

—Ethel, please!

—One more word out of you and I'll give you my fist again.

—Oh come on tough guy, beat a woman wyncha? Always strutting around like you're some big shot. Such a fucking little coward.

Everything was a choke of confused, barking voices for a moment before Fred said, —If somebody gotta climb it, let it be me, Rick. You know I used to climb.

Rick looked around, put his fists on his hips, curled his lips back over tobacco-stained teeth. He looks a little like a vulture at this moment, weighing up the various carcasses arrayed around him, considering which one to feast on first, which would taste best.

Lucy...

Fred was hoisted up bodily by rope. The rest of them had scaled, by hook or by crook,

up the side,
fistfuls of rock careening down,
bits of it striking their faces.
Ethel was the last one up,
Face streaked by dirt,
dripping blood and sweat where she had been struck in
the face by falling rock,
but miraculously she had held on and come up.
Lucy had climbed like a wiry monkey,
seemingly defiant of Rick,
whom she knew would be secretly pleased if she fell back
down to her death.
Finally,
exhausted,
the four of them stood at the top of the sea cliff,
gasping for air.
When they regained the strength and composure to survey
what lie ahead of them,
they could hardly be reassured; a vast desert stretched
on before,
as far as the eye could see.
There was no drinkable water,
no oasis anywhere in sight.
There was what looked like a rough building in the distance.
It seemed, oddly, pyramidal.
—Are we in Egypt? Rick wondered to himself.
Suddenly,

Ethel turned,
let out a cry,
and then grew eerily silent.
She smiled, held out her arms to her sides in a Christ-
like pose,
and dove back off the edge of the cliff before anyone
could stop her.

Fred seemed confused.

Had he just watched his wife of twenty years kill herself?
Ethel was a spot on the ground below,
Too far down to be clearly discerned,
But she made no thump as she hit the dirt
and died...

There were no tears as they ambled around aimlessly,
finally deciding to make their way down to the desert
floor.

Overhead, the sun punished them
with bloody, fiery rays,
seemingly attempting to burn them where they stood.
The sand crept into their shoes,
up their nostrils,
down their throat,
—A little while longer, and we're dead,
thought Rick.

He stripped off his sodden shirt.
Then ahead, he spied something.
—Who?

He wasn't sure he he wasn't hallucinating.

Perhaps it was simply a mirage.

A twisting figure in white; a desert angel, robed and ghost-like.

—Walking toward us.

The others were collapsing around him.

Rick continued forward a few steps,

put his arms out,

pitched onto his knees.

The white figure of a woman advanced.

Her eyes were solid gold,

a glowing fire,

reflecting the sun,

the woman was a Phoenix,

and the rest faded outward into darkness...

He sat at the edge of the bar, nursing his beer.

She sauntered up to him,
slinking in her black dress,
smelling of mothballs and cheap booze.

A radio somewhere.

Tinny music moving on the wind.

—These old floorboards creak some.

—Yeah, sure.

She put out her hand.

He captured it like a falling bird in his own,
put it on his leg.

She made a fist.

She grimaced.

—You sure got pretty hair. What's your name?

—Norma Jean.

—You telling me the truth?

—Sure.

—No, you ain't. I know'd better. But I guess Norma
Jean is as good a name as any.

The fat barkeep tiptoed up,
as if he were inspecting a particularly vicious
or mysterious duo of mating animals in their natural
habitat.

He wiped off the counter with a filthy rag,
said, —Last call.

There was nobody in the whole damn place to call
to.

He smiled out of the corner of his eyes,
like he was enjoying a private joke.

The little baldy fidgeted on his stool,
dumped the last of his beer down his throat.
A pesky gnat drifted by like a single moat of dust on the
still air.

Outside,
a train chugged by lonely in the throes of the night.
It was Autumn closing down,
moving into winter.
A wind blew cold eddies of coming frost through the
bones.

—Say, you want we should go maybe?
she said,
her tired, seamed face taking on a look of bored resignation.
She ran her hand through the back of her dirty brown
tresses,
mussing up the curls so that they stood up in back.

The portly little gent looked at his beer in consideration.
A fella got so he could hear the tick of his own heart
counting down the days,
as the lines in his face grew longer and more pronounced.
A fly died at the edge of the bar in a small puddle of
leaky hops.

It crawled toward its eternity on sluggish, spindly legs.
He felt the same,
knew the cold of that sticky mess.

Her lips parted.

Smoke drifted out of her lungs.
The turntable in the corner began to skip around,
the record warbling until the dire honky tonk became
a bald tire chug.

—Sure,

he said quietly. —You know a place, you take me there.

—What kind of car you drive, mister?

she asked as if it were the most natural question in the
world.

—57 Chevy.

She turned around a little,
and he wondered why she did this.
The barkeep looked at them askance out of the corner
of a bleary, jaundiced eye.
He had seen it all before.

She clack-clacked across the wooden floor into a
pool of shadow, stopping only to look at him sideways
at the entrance.

She suddenly slid her jacket on in a single movement
that seemed to defy physics.

She swayed,
put out her hand,
and pointed one red fingernail at him unsteadily.
She hooked her index finger back and forth,

wiggling it in a come-on motion.
The little man hefted his glass,
sighed,
slid off his stool.
He wasn't swaying at all.

Outside the night was pregnant with the expectant
chirp of the cicadas,
the nearby din of the occasional truck,
and the aforementioned train lumbering like an iron
beast in the darkness,
headed to a termination point as yet undetermined.
The old Ford sat idle in front of the dilapidated road-
house,
a lonely black insect rusting in front of a forgotten
hive.
The road stretched starkly between blackened fields,
lying from east to west between stretches of dirty as-
phalt and dusty trail. Wooden pickets tottered like dy-
ing sentinels,
wrapped in rusted barbed wire,
enclosing brown husks rearing up like living fingers to
the overhead expanse of sky.
That sky swept on forever,
he thought,
seeing all things,
collecting sins and misfortunes,
utterly indifferent to the livings and dyings going on
beneath it.

She slid in the passenger side,
and he got in,
settling into the shadow,
feeling the leather seat give beneath his plump little ass.
He hit the ignition, gunned it, felt his car sputter to
macabre sentience beneath him.

Was she asleep?

He nudged her with his fingers,
felt her stir, heard her mumble.

Dreamland.

She could sleep away the minutes of emptiness it would
take to get there. No conversation meant he had time
to think and prepare.

His headlights cut a sickly path in front of him,
illuminating bug spatter against the windshield as he
maneuvered through the dipping hills,
past stretches of wood and sagging,
broken barns with doorways that beckoned darkly,
like the rotten, toothless maws of mysterious ancient
women.

The night was silent and time was a thudding hammer
in his chest.

He could see it blink like a winking eye in the dark-
ness.

Pull in to the concrete oasis.

Motel.

The sign actually read: L nch,

the u having burnt out and not being worth much to replace.

At any rate, every motorist would get the idea.

He pulled in,
stopped the car,
looked over at his passenger.
She had passed out and was leaning over on the window.
A thin trickle of saliva was hanging out of one corner
of her mouth.

Her hair was a curly, windblown mess.

He decided to let her sleep for the moment,
and got out,
feeling slightly short of breath.
He hadn't smoked for nine months,
but his lungs still troubled him.
He stood for a moment on the cold asphalt,
looked up at the sky,
thought he could hear distant rumbling of thunder,/endmoonnoin
and decided it was probably semi trucks coming up over
the nearby overpass.

He felt an odd moment of dislocation,
as if he were simply having a dream and was himself
watching himself as a fictional character.

Times like these, he felt himself lifted out of his body,
felt the fibers of his being become less substantial,
more akin to a kind of smoky vapor,
and felt vertigo rock him as he fought the urge to fly out
of his physical form...

(or maybe it was simply a terror wondering what constituted the separation of his physical form from his conscious self?)

He didn't know.

He fought to remember who he was,
to bring together the separate entities that seemed to
pickle together

inside his skull.

Inside his own identity again,
he walked on sturdier legs toward the front,
pulling back the glass doors,
but finding himself confronted with a flashbulb image
of himself reflected in the smudged surface of the door.

He took in, instantly,
the short, pudgy form,
the balding pate,
the jowls,
the thick glasses,
the unremarkable visage of a man who would never be
noticed in a crowd
But the eyes!

The place was small and dark and he wondered if,
perhaps,
it hadn't been deserted by a disgruntled employee or forlorn owner.

He could faintly hear the static fuzz of a radio,
smell the smell of old tobacco and musty sheets,

and he thought,
somewhere,
someone was neglecting to do their duty.
The thought didn't bother him.

He put his pudgy palm on the bell.
Tinkled it.

Waited.

Waited.

He thought he could smell rancid ketchup.

A shadow fell across the lobby.
From some unidentified space in the back,
a tall, gaunt figure emerged,
said nothing in the way of greetings or salutations,
and merely brought a thick registration book up from
below the counter, opening it up, seemingly at random,
and placing a pen upon it.

The little man smiled,
tried for friendliness, sounded stiff and awkward, said
—It's just me.

—Okay.

—How much?

—What?

—Er, for the room.

He handed over some crumpled bills,
registered as
—Joe Stiff,
and took the key from the clerk,
noting how cold his hands were.

He turned,
walked back outside,
opened his door,
got behind the wheel,
started up,
and drove out of the front lot to the little dead end road
in back,
which intersected several lots,
each with an individual prefab cabin.
Unremarkable, even seedy.
Pink flamingoes on the lawns,
plastic roses,
everything badly in need of a coat of paint.
He parked in the gravel drive in front of cabin 216.
He huffed, puffed, put his hands on the wheel,
and reached over to nudge her again.

—We're here.

It took her a few minutes to stir.
She looked like the sleep had sobered her some,
but she was still drunk enough he reckoned.
He helped her out and onto her feet.

She swayed a little,
but eventually she started clack-clacking unsteadily up
the walk and to the door.
He put the key in,
his hands shaking a little.
She murmured a few unintelligible words.
He pushed the small of her back and she staggered in.

The place smelled of mildew and dirty sheets,
stale smoke,
and the trapped funk of bad air.
Thrift store pictures of flower pots and old ships hung
crookedly on the smudged,
dirty walls.
A few moths flapped lazily around the ceiling fan light.
There was a TV in front of the bed.
It had a coin slot.

Unremarkable in every way.
She walked around the bed,
nearly colliding with the end table as she put out a hand
to steady herself against the wall.
He sat his plump little bulk down,
huffed a bit,
and considered her.

—How much?

She slurred some words at him.
He thought he caught some of it,
but he wasn't sure.
He twirled his keys around a busily nervous finger.
He could feel his pulse begin to race.

She looked at him with bored,
flat fish eyes,
giving him the appraisal one might give a particularly
unappetizing side of meat,
(one that, perhaps, had been left to sit out until it was
no longer edible).

—Twenty five. And I don't do no kinky stuff. Nothing rough.

—Sure.

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence.

He sat there in confusion.

Outside,

he could hear the roar of locomotives, eating up the tracks like great iron monsters, blowing noise and exhaust in their wake.

The world was connected by electric power,
by mangled iron and rotten sin,
but in here it was all dark.

He could feel his pulse quicken,
his breath begin to rise and fall raggedly.

She staggered against the wall,
put out a hand to steady herself,
then rolled over onto the bed.
Her legs fell apart,
and he could see up her skirt.
She wasn't wearing underwear, and he wasn't surprised.
Her legs were streaked with dirt.
No hose.

She was a cheap, dirty whore.

—C'mon baby, c'mere.

Her lips parted sensually; her lipstick was smeared.

—Okay, okay.

She put out her hands and beckoned.

He looked at the sharp little tips of her nails.

He grabbed her throat suddenly,
and she smiled up at him,
assuming it to be a game.

He continued to smile.

Keep smiling, keep smiling...

She is smiling an idiot grin,
but he can tell it is hurting her.
Even through the liquor she can feel the pain.

He squeezes tighter.

It is like putting his hands around the throat of a little
puppet.

He is a man a thousand feet tall.

From up here,
he could pop the little twig of her neck as if it were simply
the spindly branch of a dead tree.
Her hands fly to his enclosed grasp,
but he hangs on tight.

She begins to struggle,
tries to let loose a strangled scream.

Flails as he reaches with one hand beneath her,
struggling,
for the pillow.

On the face now,
hand still clutching the throat.

He falls on top of her,
holding her down with his weight as she struggles.

Her eyes become twin moons of exquisite,
pitiful fear and terror.

The boy is walking the sidewalk several blocks away from his own neighborhood.

The year is 1986.

Someone drives by playing Ozzy Osbourne.

The day is hot.

The sun is beating down on his little sweaty head.

Across the street is a laundromat.

The sidewalk is broken and cracked and covered in old chalked outlines of hopscotch games played by children who may fade, like silent ghosts into the fold of years.

Ahead is an intersection,

a gas station,

a rotting apartment building,
more neighborhoods.

Working class neighborhoods.

The school bus garage is close.

It is summertime.

The boy is lost in his own thoughts.

The world around him is dirty,

the neighborhood is run-to-riot and the yards are littered with trashy toys.

Howling pooches stalk around weed-choked backyards at the end of chain leashes.

The boy walks to get away from his grandparent's house, where he and his mother are currently living.

The mother is at work.

The grandmother does not work.

The boy is maybe eleven.

He spends most of his time watching MTV,
or walking around alone.

His fantasies are centered on science fictional worlds
and scenarios,

stuff culled from movies,

comics,

and cartoons.

A normal kid, except for his friendlessness,
his loner selfhood.

(He hears a laugh. Something sinister. Where did it come from? He isn't sure. He suddenly looks down at his feet, at first not quite comprehending what he was seeing. Was it just an old advertisement? But he could tell it was something different.)

He reached down and picked up the filthy piece of paper.

(He looks at the picture. She is bent down on all fours. Her hair is up in a bun. The picture is black and white. She is nude, stark white body almost bleached out by the photograph.)

—She is 12.

It is rough, dirty newsprint.

He suddenly realizes there is something wrong with

the picture.

There is something wrong with the world.

Things aren't making sense to him.

Who are...these?

(He flips the picture over. On the opposite side is an orgiastic collage, too much for his eyes to take in, and the quality of the images is not good. There is another picture to the side, larger and clearer.

She is pulling up her shirt. Long, light-colored hair. Empty eyes, but a smile—)

—She is 16.

He dropped the thing suddenly.

It fluttered to the ground.

He walked away with his heart pounding,
on legs that trembled.

He could feel a strange mixture of fear,
guilt,

and excitement.

He was shaking like a leaf.

He tried to tell his mother about the picture he had found. But it didn't come out right,
and she never listened to him much, anyway.

She seemed as if she might be off in a science fiction world, too.

He would never tell his grandmother,
who must have wondered why he was so glum and sullen

when he entered the house, and what exactly was wrong, but never asked him a thing.

At any rate, she cooked some cheeseburgers, and he ate slowly, reflectively, munching French fries and feeling a mixture of sickness and elation.

(Later, he would see his two young cousins fresh out of the bath, piebald cunts and long, stringy wet hair. His grandmother would try and rustle them into the bedroom for a powdering. He would remember the image as he walked the lonely, shaded neighborhoods, up and down little dipping hills, and past old playgrounds choked with empty soda cans, old bottles, and rusted equipment.)

The pictures turned up at his sneaker toes from time to time.

Who was dropping them around?

—She is 14.

—She is 16.

—She is 12.

Young girls in their underwear, holding out bananas...

Her eyes work him up and down.

The corners of her mouth twist upward.

Her jaw is a solid wedge, her face skinny and pale.

Eyes are large, hair is a cornstalk yellow bob,
with rough ends or edges spilling down across her cheeks.

She is thin and young and desirable,

(but only if your particular fetish or kink runs to boyish
females).

He picks a book up off the circular rack.

Around him,

old ladies bustle in and out of the framework of his consciousness.

—Like that?

He flips through the book.

What is it about?

He has no idea.

How did he come to be here?

All he remembers is a car trip through a countryside of
bland, indistinct features.

She stooped low over the table.

On the table was a large baby doll.

Inside the rubber chest cavity were phony organs.

The swimming pool was large and echoing with wet plops.

A row of young kids in bathing suits stood behind her, slouching miserably in their grief.

Null stood beside the instructor, dripping chlorine from every pore, but feeling mellow for all that.

—I can't stand the smell, she said. —I don't know how others do it.

Her hands were wrapped in heavy rubber gloves. Null shifted uncomfortably from one foot to another.

—We have examples from real life, he said. — Jeffrey Dahmer, for instance:

told his neighbors the unpleasant smell wafting out from his apartment was simply rotten beef from one of his freezers malfunctioning.

Henry Lee Lucas drove cross-country with the remains of Frieda Powell wrapped in pillow cases in his car.

The smell must have been unbelievable.

Yet,

when he was stopped,

he claimed to the policeman it was just garbage.

The cop said it smelled like hell, and hurried him on to get the hell away from him...

—Serial killers have an ability to withstand strong, unpleasant odors.

—I read that somewhere. Oh yes, I read it in Colin Wilson.

She put her hands in the plastic chest cavity,
pulled out what seemed like a continuous string of chicken
gizzards, tripe,
rubber hearts,
and old slops of grey liver.

—It still doesn't make it any easier.
What about you?

The instructor looked at him with eager eyes.
She had short,
brown hair with frazzled, split ends, and large plastic-
framed glasses.

He noticed she was wearing a bathing suit under her
white lab coat.

He said, —Oh, I don't really do this work. It's just not
me.

She looked puzzled.
She jiggled sloppy wetness between her hands,
weighing the respective coils of intestine like Lady Jus-
tice.

—Then why are you here?
He didn't have an answer.
But he didn't let it bother him.
Null rolls over in bed.
It is stifling hot dark,

and the room is a disaster.

Next to him, his x-wife is lolling naked and unashamed.

Outside,

there are a number of fat women.

Obscure family members.

How are they all related?

They look like lumbering dinosaurs,

mutants after the Apocalypse.

What the hell are they doing here?

Everything is darkness and confusion.

—I have something I need to tell you.

—What?

—I don't think you'd even believe me if I broached
the subject.

Cracker crumbs stick to his back.

There is a window to his left.

Null remembers a time when he was lost in a similar
building,

finding himself rolling around in bed with a fat man.

This might as well have been in Paris,

because the place was haunted by the ghost of Genet.

Now though, it was the Family House.

He knew it well.

—I don't want to hear any of your bullshit, okay?

I had more than enough of that in the past.

He notices her breasts; one is larger than the other.

She turns over,

farts,

and her huge white ass looms under the blanket like an emerging dolphin.

He imagines himself holding an alien face between his fingers.

What are you?

I suppose I could introduce you by way of a dream I had. Or was it?

—Was it what?

—Just a dream. I've heard about similar things happening.

She turns back around,
Her face is not beautiful.

In fact, it is pretty blotchy and red,
and freckled.

Her hair is a tussled, dirty mess.
Too much crusty eyeliner.

—Like what? Spill it.

—I was in this clinic. I'm not sure where or when it was. I walk into this room. The walls are a hideous white. Bone white. Antiseptic white.

—Too much exposition, darlin'.

—Okay. Anyway, I know there is a girl in there I love. And she is a girl I've never seen before in real life, so I know this had to be a dream.

—Wait...you're not fucking sure?"

Pause.

—No.

Pause.

—Continue.

—Anyway, I go up to this girl has been laid out in a hospital bed. And she is maybe twenty years old, and she has an IV in her arm, and she is bandaged, but her hair falls around her pillow in a way that is real pretty. And she seems to be pretty perky, although I can't remember just what the hell she is on about. Anyway, the whole thing takes on the weird aspects of a ceremony as the doctor comes in...

Pause.

—And?

—But the doctor, he just stands there. And right behind him, coming in with a little box, is...is one of them.

—One of what?

—One of the...aliens.

Pause.

—Oh.

—Yeah. And he is short, with a big head. And there is this smell clings to him. And he has this little box. He shoves the box up under the nose of the girl lying in the bed. The doctor and the nurse stand aside silently, as if this is some sort of honor. He says, —I'm sorry, but your baby has died, and I make that is what the smell is.

Then he comes over to me.

I don't feel any fear.

He shoves the box under my nose.

But it isn't a dead human baby.

I'm not exactly sure what the hell kind of baby it is
...looks like a little homunculi...

—A what?

—Homunculi...a miniature, artificial man.

—Oh.

—Then I wake up. Anyway, I read in a book by Dr. David Jacobs that people who have had contact with UFO entities use to be shown a box, but that they could never remember what it was they saw in the box. Only later, under hypnosis, could they remember what it was they saw. And what they saw was a hybrid, an alien/human fetus...

Pause.

—I have to go take a piss. Hold on.

She gets out of bed and Null follows her
flabby, cellulite-riddled ass
out the door

with his eyes peering in the gathering gloom.

Has she left him out of anger?

He slowly gets up.

He doesn't want to be in here alone.

Before he can move,
the door bursts open.

His grandmother comes in the room,
points at a pile of rusted junk

(that looks like a toy horse for a child held on dirty,
rusty springs)

and exclaims silently.

At the door, several of the monstrously fat women
(who have gathered for the apparent ceremony of the
reuniting of Null with his ex-wife)

wait at the door as if to claim the grandmother again
after she has performed her senseless,
illogical function.

(Illogical because, as far as Null knew, his grandmother was long dead.)

—This can't actually be happening, can it?

He laid back down,
shut his eyes,
and then decided that he needed to go to the door for
an explanation. Perhaps this was a relative that simply
resembled his dead grandmother. Perhaps it was an insane
person.

Anyway you sliced it,
he wanted some answers.

He got up,
circumnavigating the sea of junk
(mostly broken toys and piles of plastic refuse and tin
cans),

and made his way to the bedroom door in the dark.
The door was cracked.

He could see some commotion going on outside.

He went up to the door,
feeling as if he were doing something forbidden.
He put his fingers to the warped,

dusty wood,
pushed,
saw a surprised head turn,
a head attached to a huge back wrapped in a cheap flannel shirt.

One of the fat women.

His x-wife suddenly appeared in the doorway,
pushing past the fat women.
She was completely naked.

She put out her hand.
He grasped it,
suddenly remembering every time she had ever hurt him.
Her flabby white body disgusted him.
He sank his fingers into the soft skin of her hand,
causing her to cry out.
She recoiled from him,
heading back out the door,
causing a commotion.
Apparently, no one was sleeping tonight.
Were they all waiting for them to fuck, or something?

Null was hustled into a waiting car.

An obscure uncle was driving.

He was a great fat man.

Beside him, a daughter or something was riding shotgun.

She was dressed in a schoolgirl outfit,
was a nasty-looking piece of work:

Braces.

Thick glasses.

Froggy features.

Pimples.

Dimples.

The drive was downtown,
and Null was feeling pretty damn good.

Elated really.

He couldn't stop the laughing from the backseat.

His clothes were all ill-fitting,
as if he dressed himself from a pile of thrift store castoffs
while he was drunk.

The car speeds down into several streets of dilapidated
houses,

separated by dusty, gravel-strewn old lots
and broken ruins of buildings
collecting time and dirt and the droppings of insects
and dogs.

One building stands out.

—I think we'll stop here for a minute.

Null isn't sure if this is a joke.

He gets out of the car, slams the door, looks at the place.

Old, tattered plastic garbage bags blow in the breeze, framing the entrance, which could be a converted garage with beer advertisements drooping off of it at odd angles.

He realizes it's been awhile and the uncle is still gone.

He gets out of the car slowly.

Where in the world is he?

He's never been in this part of town before.

The sun shines overhead brightly,

baking the dusty,

windblown bricks of downtown buildings

that have been tottering on the edge of space and time for the better part of the century.

Null is flat-out curious.

He steps into the darkened entryway.

Place is huge,

but he sees a glimmer of light past what appears to be mounds of boxes and old room partitions, and somewhere buried deep in the guts of the place is what appears to be a makeshift bar.

Small dive.

Crowded.

Null bellies up to the bar in wonder.

The lighting is not good,
only the glare from a few televisions placed strategically
here and there.

The man behind the bar ignores him,
but occasionally glances up with a moue of disgust
before turning his head back down to the counter.

Tables are full of card players.

People mill about.

Most of them are wearing jean vests with wild patches
of skulls and gothic lettering on the back.

Some of them are wearing old fedora hats; all of them
have long chain wallets and chino pants.

A few people start to notice him.

His whiteness sticks out here,
in this place,
like a sore thumb.

He begins to get nervous.

He gets up from the bar stool,
starts to make his way back out into the darkened en-
tryway.

Behind him, he can hear:

low murmurs,
the rattle of chains,
profanity whispered at his back.

He gets outside,
his heart hammering in his chest.
Suddenly, behind him, he hears what he takes to be
growls.

He feels his blood freeze in his veins.
He knows what that sound portends.
He can hear the clatter of nails on the concrete.

The dogs are at his back.

They bound forward,
teeth bared,
hair bristling on their back,
and he screams as he feels them sink their jaws deep
into his legs.

He struggles with livewires of writhing canine fury,
rolling in the dirt as his blood begins to fly about in
ribbons and spurts.

—I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead!

Is the only thought he can muster
in the confines of his terrorized brain.
His heart is pounding like a drum.
He feels the world go black.

He expects to wake up in Hell.
He has always expected,
one day,

to wake up in Hell.

Before the world goes black,
the approach of a running man.
A comic figure in an old hat and faded clothing,
But big.
Approaching.
Stick in hand.
He bends over, raises the stick.
It's the last thing that Null can remember.

(When he wakes up he sees a guy looks like Norton from "The Honeymooners" if Norton had been ten years younger and a body builder.)

A real mensch.

A working-class guy from the Fifties, maybe.
But beneath the blue collar muscle,
the face of a put-upon little geek.

—Almost had you there, buddy, he says.
He picks Null up by the arm,
which he has dirty bandaged.
But everything seems okay.

—Yeah. Thanks. You saved my life.
Null isn't quite sure what to say.
The pain has subsided,
the dogs are nowhere to be seen.

—Yeah, that was a pretty nasty duo. But I took care of 'em. Ran 'em off with their tails between their

legs. I'm the new sheriff around these parts, so to speak.

Null has no idea what he's talking about.

The day drones on around him.

Somewhere, a truck rumblyfarts in the distance.

A large horsefly alights on his bandaged arm.

Null realizes they are surrounded by a small gaggle of reporters snapping photos.

—Mr. Jim! Mr. Jim! Denny Albrecht from The Morning Tattler. Tell me: Why is it you decided to start down here in Brompton in your effort to clean up the city?

Jim says nothing,
just points his thumb over his shoulder,
while more reporters shoot rapid-fire questions at him.
Null doesn't want to go back inside,
but soon Mr. Jim is leading the way,
and,
for some reason, he feels obligated to follow.

The barroom is deserted.

Null notices for the first time that the bottles of booze are stacked on a row of old washing machines.

The light from the television sets is very blue.

Mr. Jim begins to climb the walls like a spider.

Null feels his mouth drop open.

Reporters snap photos,
point,
holler questions.

Mr. Jim stops momentarily,

perched on a doorframe,
and poses like he is in a Mr. Universe competition.
He throws the television sets down to the floor,
where they explode in showers of sparks.

Null realizes he is in the presence of a living, breathing superhero,

A —strange visitor from another planet.

He goes outside.

Across the yard,
an old man dressed like a farmer is nestling the biggest damn cats Null has ever seen in his life.

They look like miniature ponies.

—Sure grow ‘em big out here, huh, son?

Null had already seen more than he could process.
One of the cats jumped from the old man’s grasp,
leapt over the fence,
began to slither up to Null,
stalking him as if he was an overgrown mouse.
Null recoiled in terror,
dove to the ground,
put his hands over his face.

And this was only one day.

Back at the house,
a boy relative (perhaps) watched eagerly out the window.
In the distance,
funny lights danced in the night sky.
—It's a jet, I said,
—It's no jet. It's a spaceship.
he said,
his grin widening out until it looked positively shark-
like.

There was something out there in the distance.
I felt the first few tingles of fear grip my spine.
I pointed.

—look, you can see the landing lights.
But he remained unconvinced,
and I wasn't sure who I was trying harder to convince,
him or me.

Suddenly,
a few girls popped into the room.
More obscure relatives.
They were milling about in the night.
These were cousins and friends,
pretty brown hair grown long;
wild girls in the prime of their life.
They wanted to go walking in search of
—spacemen.

—We know this guy. He's a little weird. Really good
looking. Long hair guy. He does all this strange shit,

man. Guy is strange. I think you and him might get a long.

This cousin grabbed my hand in hers.

I wondered what it would be like to fuck a cousin.

Jerry Lee Louis did it.

Hell,

I think Elvis did it, too.

(I suppose I could be wrong about that)

She had chipmunk cheeks.

Dimples.

Blue doggie eyes.

Young.

Love love love.

Her friends were skinny,

tanned,

and they seemed to float around me like a gaggle of supernatural witches, so I can't ever really fix my vision or concentration on one of them.

It doesn't matter much,

because we start losing them before dawn.

You know the way you might start off with a group of people,

driving around,

or just walking around the way you did when you were kids,

all gathered together in the silent temple of the night,

holy and present in a new way under the moon,

accompanied by the high cloying reek of flowers

and the weirdness of night bugs

no one knows,
and the dust that gets in the creases of your toes...

So finally it is only my cousin and another girl,
and I say,
—So who is this guy we're going to meet?
And I look over and realize we are in some strange
neighborhood I've never been in before,
because the houses have to be 200 years old,
but look like somebody covered them in pink
and orange
and black submarine paint,
and some of them have little streams running in front
of the porch, (which I realize must make it hard to go
in and out without getting your feet wet).

—Oh, we know where he lives. It's this place down
the street. Real low rent. Dogs, I think.

They know I hate dogs.
The sun is coming up in orange and golden splotches,
making my eyes hurt.
I am tired and dusty and thirsty,
but the girls seem to have all the energy in the world.

Never did find out what the other one was named.
Every time she asked,
they would just bust out giggling,
and give me something obviously phony.

Clouds darken the street.

It could almost be night again,
or maybe that is just the mood I've been thrown into.
The place looks like a series of storage sheds.
White cube-like structures separated by a strip of black-
top.

We go up to a door marked 213.

The girls look at me, giggle.

They are standing beside me.

—Well, he's your friend.

Pause.

—Well, he's not exactly a friend, you know. Just a
guy we know.

—Yeah, and we, like, don't really know him that
well, dig? Just sort of know him from around school.

Coquettish.

The skinny one with long black hair holds her skinny
arms out in front of her,
lacing her long-nailed fingers together stiffly,
as if she is bursting with joy.

I notice she is Asian.

Okay. I step forward.

I put my fist out to knock.

I notice little black spots crawling across the door.

A heavy infestation of roaches.

I recoil.

Amazingly the door opens without me even touching it.

I know the girl who comes to the door.

I know I know this girl.

She's young.

Short, curly brown hair.

Conservative sweater,

looks like a college valedictorian.

I realize her clothes are twenty years out of date.

Suddenly I remember her as the victim of a particularly notorious serial killer.

I've seen her face in an old tabloid,

or a television special.

If it's not the same girl,

I'll eat a hot bowel of shit.

But how could she still be alive?

My brain tries to wrap itself around the obscure puzzle.

Poor thing to live in such a hovel.

I stand aside while the girls take control.

—Is Jack still living here?

—Jack?

—Yeah. Long hair, really skinny, long black coat.

Always really quiet. Wanders.

The dead girl's face suddenly lights up with

—stupid pink affect

—Oh, him. Yeah, I guess so. Strange guy. So sweet, but he leaves and just...walks, you know. Told me he's traveled all around. I believe him, too, even though he doesn't seem to have any pictures or souvenirs or anything. Yeah, he lives two doors down I think. Not sure

if he's home, though.

Suddenly,

as if in answer to our calling,

a tall, dark figure steps out of the night.

He puts his hands behind his back.

He looks like the cat that has just devoured the canary.

Or maybe that isn't quite right.

He seems still, ominous; pregnant with meaning and purpose.

—Did someone call?

He seems pleased.

The murder victim smiles,

shuts the door,

goes back to darkness and roaches and God knows what else.

The girls giggle,

I am unsure where I fit in to this dynamic,
but Jack seems to be perfectly at ease with himself and everything else. He smiles a crooked half-grin.

He has a scrubby red beard,
short, and features that hint at a history of good genetics.

His gloves have the fingers cut out of them.

—Well, what do you girls want to do this morning?

I'm completely forgotten about.

I don't really care.

It's getting warmer out as the day progresses,
and I feel weariness grip my skull.

But the walking of dusty pavement
and the pain in my feet conspire to keep me alert.

The girls flank Jack on either side...

I trail behind.

—Yeah, I suppose I should feel guilty for it. I don't, though. I needed the money.

Jack is pacing back and forth.

I notice for the first time how really young he is.

Maybe twenty-five?

—But somewhere, inside yourself, you DO feel guilty about it. It violates the norms you were raised with. It seems like another scar on your spiritual flesh, am I right? You smolder inside just thinking about it.

She is sitting on the grass,
her legs curled up beneath her.

The Chinese girl.

The other girl disappeared a few hours ago.

I was too tired to keep track of where she was going,
but I assume home.

I think I've been up for days; I feel like it.

—What if I told you you can be free of all this pain? What if I told you there was a way to let the demons go? You can, you know. Just have to trust me. Is that such a hard thing to do?

It must be ninety degrees,
but he's not sweating at all,
despite his heavy coat.

I think he's got ice water flowing through his veins.

The girl rocks back and forth a little,

hugs her knees,

looks down at the grass.

She seems doubtful and disturbed.

—I don't know. I mean, you've done it before?

—Many times. Whatever you might think, there's a demon inside of you. A sort of tumor in your body. That tumor grows when we trespass our personal boundaries, allowing the demon to take root. Therein he dwells and begins to reign in our lives. One little operation, a few deft movements of these hands,
and he held up his hands and looked at them as if they were objects of wonder,

—and I can cast that demon to the wind. You'll never know it. You'll be in a deep trance. I'll see to it.

I was only barely cognizant of what I was hearing, but I felt my awareness grow increasingly as the details of what he wanted to do began to slip out of him. I didn't know how to respond,
so I just kept my mouth shut.

But I could feel myself get more and more nervous.

A pesky fly started to buzz around my nose.

They picked up and walked.

I notice for the first time that Jack has produced a pack. Looks like a student backpack, army green. Where in the hell had he been hiding that all morning?

It isn't long before we walk through an abandoned parking lot,
into the bowels of what appears to be a rundown amusement park.

In the distance,
the skeletal remains of Ferris wheel and roller coaster

rear upward
into the sun
like the fly-specked remains of prehistoric monsters.
Trash and litter blow casually down the dusty,
echoing streets,
and old booths are boarded up on either side,
their walls still reverberating the distant chuckle
and high,
piercing laughter of empty children.
Ghosts haunt this place,
ghosts of families trudging through empty spaces of hollow,
bored hours,
laughing a little too forcibly,
smiling a little too readily
at strained music and phony sentiment.

A large white building loomed under the sun,
with two cement ramps leading up and in,
and a staircase leading out.

The doorways were open.
Jack and the girl started up.
I wondered just what the hell this place had been.

Inside,

the white walls were streaked with dried blood.

I make this must have been a butcher store or something.

It was some place they cut meat.

Suddenly, Jack reaches into his pack and pulls out a long white coat.

—I'll need to concentrate for a short while, then we can begin,

Jack said.

He seemed to close his eyes for a few moments as I watched in amazement,

scrunching his face up at intervals

as if he were going through some sort of internal struggle.

There were a number of large freezers lying dead along the wall.

The girl sauntered up to one slowly,

looking as if she, too, were now in the fever grip of some dream.

She lay down,

mouthng a prayer that might have been a plea for expiation

of past wrongdoings.

—And I want you to forgive me, for every man I've seduced, for all the times I whored myself, for every dollar I ever took for whoring myself, for all the sins of my past life...

She spoke these words softly,
her eyes shining like glass.
Jack strode up to her purposefully,
waving the knife above her naked midriff.
I suddenly stepped forward,
grabbed his arm,
(which was held above his head in a grand gesture).

—You can't do this!

—This is insane.

—What if you kill her?

—Have you thought about that?

He stopped.

It seemed as if someone else was speaking through him.

It was another, deeper voice.

His eyes were glazed over,
the eyes of an obvious madman.

I knew him to be under the control, then, of possessing spirits.

Yes, he said, as if to confirm for me this reality,
—and there is something riding you. You need me, Null,
just as assuredly as she needs me. Look,
and he thrusts something in front of my face.

It was a pornographic magazine, printed like a cheap tabloid.

Inside were a center spread of photos of the girl getting
gang fucked by several scrawny,
ugly older men.

I recoil.

—So you can see, quite plainly, WHY she needs
me. She's been driven by this demon of whoredom for
years. It's pushed her to drugs, prostitution...It's inside
of her, eating up her mind. It grows like a cancer, but
like a cancer, it can be eliminated. It can be cut out.

He raised his knife,
waved it in the air.

He suddenly came forward,
putting his hands on my arms,
and his face became set with an intent
and deeply somber look.

—I know about the one lurking inside of you. The
parasitic twin that you absorbed in your flesh, and how
his unborn spirit manipulates and fouls your body. I

know about the fingernails and teeth they removed from your stomach lining. I know how he drives you with mad thoughts of blood and decay. And I can cure all of these things, and you can be well.

I can see the depths of madness in his eyes,
see the hollow pit of his soul,
going down,
down,
like a hole.

His mind disappeared down this space ages ago,
I think.

And whatever has him,
controls him
alone.

I back away from him,
shaking my head.

He wants me to lie down on one of the flat freezer tops.
I'm to be next.
To have my unborn twin monster cut from me in bloody wonder.

(And perhaps die as a result?)

—If something happens,
—if the cops find me and question me about this,
—I'll tell them it was all you.

I had no part in this. I can't have a part in this.

I know full well what is going to happen next.
I walk quickly out of the gaping doorway,
down the concrete ramp,
into the sunlight.
As my eyes adjust to the brightness,
I walk down into the midway,
consider that all of life is one vast carnival of tragedy
and sickness, where we all ride the ride,
play the game,
but fundamentally,
the odds are always rigged in favor of the house.

And then the screaming starts.

He's cutting her.

He's really cutting her.

Psychic surgery.

Woman writhe in pain.

Go, and sin no more.

I walk away into the distance.

Time and the city beckon.

This girl was fucking nuts,
that's the first thing.

Or she was possessed or something.

Found her wandering around outside.
The city darkening down into night.
Wet tires speed across the pavement.
Null moving around in the darkness,
lost, alone.

Ahead he sees her,
and it all makes sense.

Maybe this was twenty years ago,
maybe thirty.

Living someone else's stupid life.

Ghosts of other people he was.

Living in a tenement with MOTHER.

Cold water in the taps,
and an old radiator that hissed and clanked,
and cracks along the plaster
and chipped paint flaking off the walls onto the ratty
carpet
in dead little clumps like the peeling skin of some dis-
eased animal they lived inside.

Ice spattering against the windows.
She followed him, like a sleek little cat; he felt, some-
how, he knew her.

Mother sitting at the edge of an old bed,
smoking one cigarette after another.
Eyes staring off into blank places.

World shifted and caught between spaces,
sitting in a crack in space and time,
snuffling out in the darkness.

(Null once entered a deserted house, guided as if by an invisible hand. He could feel his flesh creep as he tiptoed through the darkness, feeling his way along the dusty, cobweb covered walls.

It had been a nice home once. He happened upon the dining room. All was painted in moonlight and shadow, but he could see, dimly, the corpulent form of a man seated. Bow tie, bald head, red jacket long since faded. Hands held out in little bald fists at either side of the table cloth. Seated opposite, a petrified form of woman, dressed in wedding gown white, with a tiara, reared back and frozen in time, her face a comic mask of grief, her hands forever poised to stifle a yawn or belch. Trailing from each of these figures, ornate spider webs curling along the plates and platters, a skeletal chicken long since picked clean by rats. Rats could be heard squeaking in the corner, consumed with their little rat brain-waves.

Perfectly preserved in death. Suspended animation. Was it the air in here? Null watched in horror as a massive spider skittered its yellow and black body from the cracking jawbone of the moon, disgorged like living vomit to ply its deadly trade across the myriad webs.

It was a dinner forever late, a moment iced over and waiting, perched on the edge of seconds. Null sat

there in the interminable gloom. Somewhere, the hands of a dead clock began to move, the tick like a heartbeat in the dark.)

She moved into the apartment
like a robot,
her face
a possessed mask of eager, programmed anticipation.
The mother threw her cigarette to the carpet angrily,
ground it under one toe,
and walked into the first room.
(There were two rooms joined, diagonally, by an open doorway.)

—What's she doing here?

Null looked her over.

He could see she was following the dim,
schizophrenic teletype being dialed directly into her
cerebral cortex
...apparently from points beyond.

—She looks like she's drugged.

—She hasn't got a place to stay.

—Are you in the habit of picking up strays? We
can't afford this.

Null put down his coat.
outside,
he could hear the train rumble by like a great iron beast
in the night.
The elevated track was perched precariously close to
the front windows. Bedroom,

parlor,

Kitchen

...it was all one slop of mess.

Twin beds.

Null felt his excitement begin to mount.

The girl said something unintelligible.

None of her speech made any sense.

Null couldn't even quite get the gist of it; it was like a murky rabbit that kept disappearing down a series of increasingly bizarre holes that popped up, like dimensional portals, in free-floating space.

—Did you miss the? Point of no return. Taken to the cleaners. Sullied, dirty face...

She walked around the apartment, guided by unheard voices, her arms folded across her stomach, rubbing her biceps.

Short,
dirty blonde hair,
short skirt.

Why did he already think of her as naked?

—I'm sped to the place. Waiting on the sun. Lie down! We don't eat that sort of poison here! Tables have turned...

Mother looked to be on the verge of mild hysteria.

—Get her out of here! Get her out of here, or so help me God, I'll throw her out on her hard little ass!

Stinking trollop...

Null turned around,
confused,
staring first at Mother with a mouth that wanted to work
miracles,
then at the girl,
with a mouth that wanted to work
...other things.

—Forbidden to chase bunny... disappeared down
the throat... fuming in the coal bin when I move...
cock of the walk, did I spill?....

Mother lit another cigarette,
made a gesture as if to signify impatient aggravation.

—You see, everything she says she asks a question.
Oh, the nerve...

—She's just confused, is all. Maybe she can snap
out of it.

—Maybe she's hypnotized. Maybe she's a goddamn
automaton, for all we know.

—Oh mother, stop it!

She acted cold.

Null realized she didn't seem to be wearing much.

He went to get a blanket,
to throw over her.

Mother stormed back into the other room,
threw herself on the bed,
began to sob.

Somewhere,

a lonely whistle sounded in the night.

—Oh, you'll ruin us! I always knew it would happen! I hope you're happy.

Null was.

Mother put a cloth over the doorway.
Null supposed she could sleep in the front room.
He made a pallet on the floor for the girl,
who stretched her self out and spread her legs just enough
so he could turn on one side,
propped on his shaking arm,
and see her womanhood.

—I'm cold.

—I'm sorry. I'll close the window. It gets so stuffy
in here.

He went to the window.

Outside, pinpoints of light disappeared into what seemed
like a bottomless black void.

He could hear the ever-present rumble of the Elevated,
the bleat of horns and the lonely whistle of the factory
in the distance.

—Beauty doesn't do anything to impress me. I see
through its phony layers.

—I'm a cold hole. A black space floating?

He turned.

—An utter void. You eat up the world with your
fractured thoughts.

Her face became a blank slate.

He could feel the rumbling in his chest,

hear her heartbeat thump loudly against her ribcage.
Her eyes glazed over as he slid his vision down,
between her legs.

Dripping moist he imagined the womb-cave,
hot and fetid and full of promise.

—I'm the void.

—You're an angel.

He crawled across the floor like a sinuous cat,
slinking over her,
kneeling at the altar of her,
conscious that he was frozen in a moment of time that
was perfect in its sad futility.

Here was pleasure, and release, at long last.

He devoured her.

She disappeared.

Later, he was riding with the cop.

He turned to look at the officer.

He wondered what it was he was going to say to him to extricate himself from his predicament.

—You need to stop anywhere?

None of it was making sense.

Null looked out the passenger side window
as houses gave way to shops and a shopping center.

There was a heavy,
unspoken thing in the stale air.

—I'm going to stop for that lamp.

Null had no idea what he was talking about.
His mouth seemed to form the words and his lips flapped
on their own. The cop spun the wheel in heavy, horned
hands,
looked over at him, said,
—Sure. Why not? Everyone needs a shine a little light
on things, from time to time.

It didn't take Null very long to find his way back
to the department he was looking for.
The aisles were dusty, dishevelled; it looked as if the
store had not been very properly cared for,
and it was near-dead inside.

They were waiting for him.
He took the lamp, which
was as tall as he was,
skinny and black and made of a rough metal.
The shade was crooked, broken.

It was back into the car with the cop,

and the lampshade hanging out the window.

—Did the Nazis really make lampshades out of human skin?

He paused.

Ahead of him, traffic was grinding to a halt.

—What's the matter? Don't you believe it?

Pause.

—It's a little hard to accept.

—A lot of things are hard to accept. But I don't want to talk about that.

Null had a feeling he knew what the officer wanted to talk about.

—So what happened to her?

—What happened to who?

—C'mon, don't play dumb with me.

the first time I ever saw someone shape shift.

So I am sitting in this office at school,
and I am not feeling all that comfortable.
I bet you've already got an idea of how this routine goes
down:

I was a real lazy student,
shoved most of my homework assignments into the slot
of my wooden desk,
and hadn't done a damn thing all year except sit around
and daydream. In my pocket
I carried the one nudie picture I had managed to clip
out of an old book.

I was steeped in sin that year.

Unfortunately,

I was an inmate at a private school that taught the val-
ues of the Good Lord,
and so my hot little brain was constantly being pumped
full of that old-time religion.

I made the mistake of questioning the factual accuracy
of some Bible stories,
and that's what got me sent to the Principal's office.

As I listened to him drone on about how
—You need to start to pay attention to your elders when
they are talking to you,
And

—Your being rebellious, is all. I know. I have kids your

age. Best thing for you is to get out and get interested in sports,

—I suddenly realized that I was feeling a creeping sense of panic as I sat there.

Down the hall, I could hear a door slam shut.

I fancied, for a few moments, that I could hear someone crying.

But kids always cry, right?

I simply stared at him,
and he glared back with an expression that said,
—If you weren't so young and small, I'd jump out of this chair,

—throw your ass up against the wall,

—and pound the living shit out of you.

But I knew he wouldn't do that.

My eyes glazed over.

Our conversation
(which had been entirely one-sided anyway)
came to a standstill.

It was then that a weird thing happened.
His face seemed to mist over,
or become covered in a kind of milky,
fuzzy film.

I thought for a moment
I was seeing things.

I blinked.
It still looked the same.

It was then that I realized that the shape of his face
had,
in some slow,
subtle way, altered,
until he seemed to have grown a kind of white snout,
while his eyes became wide and dark.

I didn't know what was happening.
Maybe they were all correct in what their essential estimation of me was. That I was crazy.

So here I sat in a small office,
in a nice leather chair,
with a giant toad-man.
He was wearing a suit and tie,
but he was a living, breathing freak of nature.
I couldn't react.

I thought my eyes were going.

His toad-head swiveled.

—Is there something wrong?

Outside,
—I could hear the crying,
and now it sounded like lots of kids,
lots of voices shrieking and screaming.
I was balanced between two reactions:
panic and apathy.

Surely I was back in bed dreaming.

Suddenly, on impulse

(because I was quite sure I couldn't just sit there with a
giant white toad-thing in a suit),

I bolted up from the chair and out the half-open door.
Behind me, I could hear the Principal croak,
—Young man! Come back here! Don't you interfere with
things that don't concern you!

Or something to that effect.

I ran down the hall,
the only sound echoing off the bare after school walls
the slap of my sneakers against the linoleum.

Ahead of me,
coming out of a doorway to the right,
was the janitor, McGillicutty.
He had his mop bucket and he looked at me running
and said,

—Hey chief. Slow down! Just mopped these floors. You
don't want to fall and break anything you might need.

I looked into his seamed old face,
and noticed red juice dripping from the sides of his mouth.
That could have been ketchup,
or it could have been the blood of a freshly-butchered
virgin.

I didn't want to stick around and find out.

I ran up the wheelchair ramp toward the cafeteria,
which was vacant of tables and chairs and which still
smelled like old grease and nourishing stuff,
and I realized how hungry I was as I stopped to catch
my breath.

It was then that I saw.

It was flopping through a doorway.

Whatever thoughts I had about food quickly disappeared
in a wave of disgust.

I turned around and puked all over the white tiles.

It looked like a giant raw liver come to life.

It moved like a slug, except quick.

It was dirty and dripping and grey,
and it slithered its way between the door at the far end
of the cafeteria.

I stood there like an idiot,
puke dripping off of my chin,
my chest heaving,
trying to think what to do.

So I turned,
ran back down the ramp,
cut across the main hallway,
and tried like hell to make for the stairway at the op-
posite end.

I got to the bottom of the staircase.

One flight up and there was the glass door.

I put one foot on the stairs.

Suddenly,
something came down and obscured the sunshine.

It looked like a giant leaf stuck to the glass.
It was oozing something that dripped through the cracks
of the door.

The stuff ran like glowing slime down the steps,
and puddled at the bottom.

It stank to high heaven,

and I got some on the tip of my shoe.

The rubber began to smoke.

I was trapped.

I felt my brain go hazy with panic.

I wanted to be home right now,
snuggled up in a blanket in front of the television,
watching cartoons.

I wanted a chicken pot pie,
a Coca Cola,
and about a dozen thin mint cookies.

What I didn't want was to be devoured by giant
flopping beef livers.

I ran back into the darkness of the hall,
rounded a corner,
and was just in time to see one of the things ooze under
a door. Suddenly,
I heard a flopping sound behind me.
Wet,
squishy...

I turned and my heart raced up into my throat.
I began to run blindly,
flailing my arms out in front of me,
and turned into the first open door I came to.
It was,
as luck would have it,
the detention room.

About half a dozen kids were in there screaming,

while the fat teacher who was supposed to be watching
the place just sat there.

I crept toward her slowly,
and she croaked,

—Bad boys running in the hallway, throwing spit wads,
talking back with sassy voices. You'll stay after school,
you'll write your name a hundred times, you'll sit up
straight and eat your veggies!

Thin trickles of green began to seep out of the fat
folds of her neck, and she looked like she was going to
burst

like a slime-filled water balloon.

I backed away,
watching the kids crawl across the wall in terror,
and suddenly,

from behind a corner of the desk,

I could see one of the grey, flopping things.

I turned to bolt for the door.

It suddenly slammed shut.

Jimmy Baker was standing there.

It looked like most of his clothes had been eaten off of
him.

His eyes were wild moons of hate,
and his mouth leered.

I saw a slimy, slopping, flopping thing ooze out from
behind his back and settle under his armpit.

Jimmy said, —Can't let you go that way, doc. The bar-
rier was not meant to be crossed.

It sounded like something from a bad movie.
It also sounded like Jimmy was speaking in another
voice that was not his own.

It was a gurgling voice,
wet and squishy
and full of mucus.

The grey liver-thing under his armpit began to spread,
like a cancer,
across his naked chest.

Suddenly,
from behind me,
I heard a huge wet sound,
like the most tremendous,
nasty fart in the world,
and I felt a gooey splash at my back.

The kids cowering against the wall let out one tremendous
scream in unison,
and broke running in all directions.

Jimmy Baker continued to be devoured by the flopping
grey thing,
until he was stumbling around,
looking as if he had been rolled in sticky innards.
The thing shot streamers of its own flesh out like feel-
ers.

I took the opportunity to push past the grey,
shambling mass of Jimmy Baker,
ran out the door,

until I saw a figure, a teacher, click-clacking down the hall.

I knew her as Mrs. Rhinehart.

—Hello, she said.

—You must come with me. I know how we can get you out of here.

Yesterday they invaded the house,
a group of tough blacks.
I think they were a gang.
It wasn't going to fly in Our Town.
Our Town was white as snow.

I looked over at my mother,
but she just seemed to accept everything.

—Damn, it sure is hot outside,
said one,
as he lolled back in Our Chair,
his leg swinging to and fro.
he seemed to be sucking on some sort of fruity ice cream.

—I'm no racist, Mother, but these people...

—Hush.

One of the girls came up to me.
She was short,
squat,
had tremendous tits.
I had never seen tits like that before.

—Once you go black, you never go back baby.

I thought that this might be true.

She wrapped a coy arm around my shoulders,
looked into my eyes with eyes smoky and sleepy and full
of wanton. Who were these people,
and what the hell were they doing here?

One of them signaled at the man in the chair.
Suddenly, I knew that something was going down.
Possibly drug-related.

As if in answer to my internal question,
a handsome small-town cop suddenly appeared at the
door.

The room was full of ghetto blacks, okay?
It was a real strange scene for a little town had never
seen many blacks before.

Or any blacks,
maybe.

We existed outside the modern time stream,
in a world that was both Nineties and Fifties.

So when a black face appeared in town,

as if by magic,
the local fuzz sat up and took notice.

So here he was,
come in the open door
(who left the door open, anyway?),
and he is looking as if he is here on Serious Business.

—I'm here on serious business, guys.

The blacks seem to come to attention,
hopping off the furniture
and lining up in front of the cop.

Okay, so this is the way it went down.

We were in love.

Now, I know that sounds hokey

and everything

but it was true; I was head-over-heels in love with this dame,

and as far as I was concerned she could do no wrong.

She was a real warrior woman,

stood tall and erect, (and why in the world she had some sort of fascination for a guy like me I'll never know),

but there it was...

Anyway,

we were living in some sort of

magical kingdom?

(No, I don't mean the one in Orlando.)

I mean, we were living in some sort of place where magic and the supernatural were taken for granted.

It seemed to be a spiritualist camp

or religious commune,

but it was staffed mainly by older people,

while the younger folks wandered around

in Dungeons and Dragons costumes

being hippies.

(I know this all sounds strange but you wanted to hear the story, right?)

So here I am,

dressed like some sort of Teutonic knight,
and I am running across this field, and Warrior Woman
is with me, and the sun is beaming
and I yell...

and I end up writing back to my aunt
that I have finally found Middle Earth,
The Warrior Woman,
and I know it is love at first sight,
and nature seems to thank us,
as we crawl down deep into a bosom of soft romance

amid the tall grasses and sweeping majestic wheat
of the old fields.

But this is only the outskirts of the camp,
and inside is where the weird fun happens.

Right away

I can see that

Everyone around me is like a character from some fantastic novel; they are all dressed like elves, leprechauns, wandering adventurers, shit like that.

The elders of the camp laugh at us from behind their withered old hands, but they leave us alone.

We are the Next Generation,
the ones that will be taking over the reigns,
so to speak,

when the old ones go off into the next dimension
(or whatever they do).

So I am a soldier again,

and I'm sleeping in these Eastern European barracks
with a bunch of medieval soldiers,

and someone explains to me that this place is —Maintained
by the counsel for any group of soldiers that just happens to be passing through.

So,

maybe orcs and hobgoblins have slept here.
Maybe.

Anyway,
she (Warrior Woman)
was there, and I can see just by the look on her face that
she has no intention of two-timing me with any of these
soldiers,
so I feel a sharp tack of relief.
Maybe that is an odd way to put it.

At any rate,
we go on like this for a little while,
me getting to know her fantasy hippie friends better,
and all the while becoming a leaner, meaner guy,
the kind of guy that really cuts an impressive figure wherever he goes. So after awhile we are all friends,
and we have all shared the magic,
and now I am dressed like some Dungeons and Dragons
fantasy hippie, and all of a sudden Warrior Woman
(who is unquestionably mine)
gets the bright idea that we need to undergo some sort
of special test or ritual
to prove the loyalty of our friends.

So we are gathered in a kind of central park,

surrounded by the buildings that actually make up the camp,
and she says,
—You know, what we need to do is build a castle out of wood. Then,
when we have everyone gathered together, we will set the building on fire. Then we'll see who comes to rescue us. Whadya think?

I said I thought it sounded groovy,
but,
inside,
I wasn't really hep to the idea of sitting in a burning building waiting for a bunch of pasty wannabe adventurers to come and save my ass.
In reality I thought that sounded like a

Really Bad Idea.

No matter.

Construction on the fire palace began almost immediately,

and I had to wonder where they found curved wood to use for the towers.

Anyway,

I had no intention of going through with it,

but one night there was some sort of initiation

which I can barely remember save that it was the entire camp assembled and Warrior Woman

and I joined hands and there were people holding candles

and we raised the cone of power and then everything blanks out

...and I knew I was a part of it then,

body and spirit,

and that I damn sure would go through with it.

After all,

hadn't I met Warrior Woman while patrolling the old fields around the camp,

dressed like one of the Kaiser's own,

screaming to the high heavens to bring me an enemy so I could spill its blood?

Yes, indeed...

So after the initiation I started to realize that the hallways and stairways of the Fire Palace were all hobbit-sized,
and that it was going to be a problem for some of these guys to get up and down them,
and even worse,
it was going to be a problem for us to get out of there when the whole place went up in smoke.

For some reason,
though,
I couldn't let that trouble me unduly.

So we met a guy that I use to know who worked for a tobacco company, and he shakes my hand, and says —T— and I are well-acquainted. You're looking good, T—.

In truth, I was feeling good, too. Middle Earth (the camp, whatever) had been good for me, and I could feel the magic of the place rubbing off, making me over into a new being. Hell, I liked everything about it (especially Warrior Woman), liked the folksy peace of it, liked the power and tranquil majesty of the place and the fact that

it seemed like anything, I mean, anything, was possible there.

So we all headed out on a highway somewhere,
and I wasn't even sure what sort of vehicles we were driving,
and I was pretty upset that we seemed to be leaving Middle Earth. (Maybe we were just patrolling the outer territories, though.)

It was a long country road,
punctuated by telephone poles,
and it seemed to go off into the distance forever.
We were obviously riding on Mad Max motorcycles.

I remember thinking that Warrior Woman looked to be getting younger
and younger,
and I wondered just how old she was,
because I had never bothered to ask her her age.
I wondered if she was even old enough to vote yet,
but then
my attention was arrested by the messages being beamed over the telephone lines
as we sped down the highway.

It was just a vision,
but what a vision it was.
A giant, fat Venus, with arms like snakes,
writhing in ecstasy as she played with a rubber dong.
I know, it didn't make any sense to my either,
but there it was.
I guess all things serve the will of the Goddess,
(especially on the outskirts of Middle Earth.)

So there was this television actor in one of our hotel rooms,
and he was the star of this particularly famous science fiction show that aired about fifteen years ago.
(And he was in a real pissed-off mood.)

I remember he was lying in bed,
and I had a box he carried along with him.
In the box were a number of discs of his television program,
and there was also an odd device that I took to be a prop.
Except, when I laid it on the bed, he informed me that it was,
in reality,
a phone...
I remember feeling really embarrassed,

and later he sat up in bed and began to strum the mandolin for my benefit.

So anyway this television character appears
and they start rapping about how they lost the hearing
in one ear,
and the actor says it happened at some fictional battle
that occurred
(only within the confines of the box)
and I am confused
but I follow them anyway.

Next, I was trimming lawn for miles...

—It's amazing here. Can you believe such a place really exists?

She walked down the hall a little,
thrust her hands into the pockets of her jeans.
He liked her lean little figure.
Her hair was curly and dark,
her cheekbones high,
and her entire body was so slender it made you wonder
if she ever ate.

—It is amazing. This is the way station between
the world of the living and the world of the dead. Between
fantasy and reality...

He knew he was being more poetic than necessary.
Was he simply trying to impress her?
He wasn't sure about his own motivations.

The hallways were like a giant, echoing maze.
Their footfalls resounded like blunt hammers in the
somberly lit murk of the place,
a darkness that was not quite dark; it was infused with
the whiteness of the walls,
with the cream colored tiles of the floor,
with the bright mahogany furnishings thrust
into odd corners
as one wound their way through the labyrinth.

You would be hard-pressed to find a janitor or maintenance person in the vast, eerie edifice; everyone at the

camp seemed to skitter around the edges of your vision,
just out of sight,
coming into focus only long enough to perform some
helpful duty,
or direct you to another significant place.

Then,

like mysterious, frightened rodents,
they seemed to disappear around the corner,
dissolve into the fabric of things,
leave you wondering.

—So many dead. So many years represented here.

—And all of them prophets?

She turned and looked at him with a curious expression.

—Perhaps, she said, —depends on what you believe, I suppose.

He wasn't any more sure of that than he was his motivations.

Outside, he knew the City of the Dead stretched on for acres and acres, making up the central place of worship of these bizarre, modern necromancers.

Could they really commune with spirits of the afterlife? The evidence presented seemed to suggest, what?

Earlier, they had been to one of the interminable funerals.

So many grey old women poised,
like a flock of crows,
around a polished casket,
while the corpse of a young man,
not of the faith, presumably,
reclined within.
Didn't the body look familiar, somehow?
He felt as if,
as he stared into the waxen,
frozen visage,
he knew the man that the body had been.

—Perhaps in another life, he murmured to himself.

The old women seemed to be praying,
right before they all murmured what amounted to a collective mui of disgust.

They filed out,
heavy and monotonous,
like grey, withered ghosts of the plains.

And that had just been the welcoming committee.

A large, empty foyer put one in mind of the lobby of a grand hotel. Every surface was highly polished and waxed.

Still, the ambience was smoky amber and brown.

They climbed stairways,

walked around the area overlooking the mezzanine, their eyes suddenly catching the raised catafalque at the bottom of a little stairs.

She grabbed his arm.

—C'mon. This is what we wanted.

They approached very slowly, feeling the heavy gloom settle over them as they took in the grim visage of the corpse.

It was laid out in peaceful repose, stiff as a little puppet, eyes screwed tightly shut

—sewn shut, she reminded herself.

—I wonder how long he has been here?

—I don't know.

She turned to him with a little contempt.

—Of course you don't, silly. How could you. Are you psychic?

—So you're going to make fun of me now?

—Oh God, you're so damn sensitive.

He was.

—What was that she was telling us? About how his spirit controls this place? Haunts it?

—Guards it like a sentinel she said.

Outside, they were well aware that a trained attack dog patrolled the night.

The animal was,
supposedly,
so intelligent it knew enough to leave welcome guests alone.

However,
he had still been terrified of the beast when they had encountered it,
just after sundown.

It had bounded up to them,
bared its fangs,
sniffed,
and realized who they were.

It had left peacefully,
and he could feel his heart thump like a drum in his chest.

—It looks like he was awfully young.

Indeed,
his face was the face of a little cherub,
with a mop of dark, evenly-parted hair.
He was wearing a little suit that looked a mockery of
the sort worn by a grown man of fifty years ago.
His little hands rested stiffly at his sides.

—How do they do it? How do they preserve them so...excellently? He looks as if he just died a few hours ago.

—I know. Who knows how long this body has been

here. But, according to their religion, he's still...with us. In there, waiting for the Judgment, the resurrection.

—Like a caterpillar in a cocoon. Sure.

It's like the Disneyland of Death, isn't it?

—Apt phraseology.

She wanted to leave,
chilled suddenly.

He wanted to put his arm around her,
but knew that that would be interpreted all wrong.

In the midst of so much death-worship,
couldn't there be touches of life?

Of warmth?

He wasn't sure.

Perhaps all such notions should be shuffled off,
like a spirit shuffling off its mortal coil,
when one was confronting the Mystery of Mysteries in
such a direct manner...

The place looked,
on the outside,
as if it were a Catholic church.

Maybe it was and maybe it wasn't.
Null walked up the steps in an uneasy,
restless fashion.

He wasn't sure he wanted to be here,
but he knew he had business inside.

Inside was slick and polished,
looking like a building that had been heavily renovated.
The floors shined waxily,
sleek,

he could hear his footfalls squeak along as he made his way across the blue linoleum
(or whatever it was).

—Everything here is blue, he said to himself.

A voice said:

—It resonates blue. But turquoise is the base color of the universe.

He had noticed,
upon entering,
the strange,
canopy-like structure sent in the center of the hall.
It was like four white posts,
with bunting wound around each.

There was no top.

In the center were a number of strange icons.

Were those young girls?

He thought they might be Hindu gods,

little cherubim,

or the bone-white effigies of departed saints.

Who could tell under such strange circumstances?

Somewhere to his left,
he knew the foyer led off to another room with a stairwell,

going up, up.

To forbidden places,

to upper rooms that opened up into areas of mystery and madness.

—The Sanctum Sanctorum, the Holy of Holies...

The voice droned on miserably.

—Exactly how much were you thinking about borrowing?

The loan officer was a tubby young fellow in shorts and a polo shirt. He raised his arm, scratched a miserable bite with one absent minded hand, and kept looking at him with a most pleasant, courteous expression, an expression open and friendly, and seemingly...

...around them,
the sick and infirm crawled in their own shit,
across the gymnasium floor.
He wondered how they were fed.
Was it dog food bowls?
He didn't know.
He wasn't going to let the high cloying funk
or the insane gibbering disturb him.

Suddenly,
an alarm seemed to go off,
a high buzzing that rang out all across the gym.
Null jumped in his chair.
The loan officer went right on talking.
An old woman with wispy white hair crawled by on her hands and knees.

—BUMS DEFECATE IN PUBLIC,
said Null to himself,
remembering an old snatch
of poem

he had picked up
somewhere.

He got up out of curiosity,
started to make his way across the gym toward the little
entryway.

The hallway was crammed full of crouching psychotics,
slobbering hydrocephalic,
pinheads of every stripe.

There was a heavy screened doorway,
and outside the sun shined on the weed choked yard as
a tall

stately man

made his way up the walk.

Dressed like a Victorian undertaker in top hat,
cloak,

and dark,

presumably musty suit,

he might have crawled fresh

from a two hundred year old crypt.

Of course,

his hands were white gloved.

On his face,

an immense walrus moustache joined both of his side-
burns

in a comic, grotesque grin of facial hair.

—Piccadilly Weepers, Null said to himself.

The gentleman knocked,

suddenly catching Null by the eyes.

—And this is death,

Null knew.

The knocking was an announcement,

an omen,

as it were.

The man continued to knock,

his eyes frozen upon Null as he delivered his singular
message

from beyond.

The man's face froze into a rictus of cold hatred,

and he slowed his knock until his hand was hovering
above the door.

He let his arm fall slowly to his side,

still locked in a staring contest with Null,

who couldn't take his eyes away from the twin burning
orbs.

Suddenly,

the man backed away from the door,

turned,

cast quick glances several times back over his shoulders,
and departed

as if in a huff.

Null was puzzled.

Could Death be so easily offended by the presence of
an interloper,

one who recognized him for what he was,

that he actually was embarrassed out of his earthly endeavors?

Null wasn't sure.

At any rate,
the day was growing late.

Two young girls,
nude,
dimpled asses seemingly exemplifying perfection.
They could have been artists' models.
They turn to each other,
confused.

Someone is in the bathtub,
playing in the filthy water.
But wasn't it time for their baths?

They would have to hurry
if they wanted to not be late for their appointment with
father.

Father was driving around town in his truck,
explaining what needed to be done
to keep the automobile in perfect working order.
His son sat back in the passenger side seat,
thought about a day long gone.

It's some sort of clinic,
and if it wasn't for the fact that I was the Son of Perdi-
tion,

I don't think I would have even been there.

As it was,
my relationship to all these doctors and nurses and un-
known personages was obscure,]endmoonindentlittle
even to me.

Mother lead me through the halls,
which were white and dull
and seemed to lead everywhere and nowhere.
—Here, she said,
pointing to a little room beyond a heavy wooden door.
Inside,

I make I'm supposed to get some sort of test.
Don't know what for.

Maybe see if I'm cancerous
or some damn thing.

I sit down on a little examining table.

People come in,
discuss me,
point at me.
Fat women in nurses outfits.
Several of them mill about,
confused.

I haven't seen a doctor yet.
I look around frantically for Mother,
but she seems to have disappeared.
Maybe she went to get him.

I sit there for what seems an interminable period,
dangling my legs off of the edge of the examining table.
I remember that we were supposed to go swimming some-
time,
at least,
I was going to go swimming.

The pool was situated at the bottom of two flights of stone steps.

I was a little fellow,
maybe no older than twelve,
and they were marching a lot of us down those steps,
which were submerged in the water,
and lead down from the ledge of two houses,
one on either side.

Or maybe it was some sort of walkway twisted around the roofs,

I can't remember now.

I followed the kid in front of me,
down the cement steps,
which were like thin strips of cement angled to dig into your feet as you descended.

I could feel the cold lick of the water against me.

Around me,

I knew that things were NOT RIGHT in the Biblical sense.

—Pretty soon it will be time for the announcement, someone said.

—Almost like being back in Tunis. Prayer calls blasted over the loudspeaker.

—We're all just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

What were they talking about?

I wondered.

I felt my body buoyed by the water
as I frog legged out to the edge of the pool,

my feet still stinging from the cement steps.
Someone bumps into me in the pool; the female swim
instructor.

We are at war,
apparently.

First time it enters into my consciousness.

The world has moved on.

Propaganda announcements over the loudspeakers,
and a whole city perched on the edge of anxiety,
anticipating the coming holocaust.

Apparently,
a new regime is in power.

The instructor swims quite close to me; I feel the
hard hump of her wet,
sleek body move against mine.

I am still a child,
but the force of the contact gives me a hard on,
makes me nervous,
and I quickly swim over to the line that is making their
way up one of the stone staircases

out of the pool.

Dripping wet we move up,
up,
until finally we are moving over rough stone steps
far above the green dip of yard
wherein the pool is situated
(in the middle of the city, which bustles around us, wait-
ing for the Dictator to come over the loudspeakers),
and I realize they've lead me to a perch that extends
around the edge of a house
...quite high.

A seat is set out on the edge of the ledge,
no railing.

Just the seat,
and an empty drop.
And I can't move forward.

So I turn,
but the going back is precarious, too, because of the
people coming up, dripping and wet,
from the pool below.

The clinic obviously doubles as some sort of school or
institute,
because Null finds himself living there,
with two other boys.
One of them is Luke,
who ambles about,

a tall but outwardly expanding shuffle of a young man,
who mumbles and looks disheveled.

His English accent is reminiscent of Ringo Starr

The place looked like some sort of dormitory,

beds lining the walls on all sides,

but it was small enough to be a prison cell.

Null was there with Luke and another boy he didn't
know,

a tall blonde boy who obviously loved animals.

Above the boy's bed were the cages.

—They aren't harmful,

he said, holding a little furry thing in the palms of his
quivering hands. Null wasn't sure just what sort of med-
ications they had him on,

but he seemed perpetually on the verge of shaking apart
with laughter. His eyes held a sort of merry madness
Null found slightly captivating, slightly unnerving.

By contrast,

Luke was a shambling, sullen mess,

always carrying his own peculiar odor of cigarettes and
stale sweat around with him,

his fingers yellow from cigarette smoke.

The staff let them smoke four times a day.

Probably not nearly enough for Luke, thought Null.

The staff seemed well-aware of the pet python,

in fact let the boy keep it in the cage over his bed,

on what was once a bunk.

Null lay in bed,
watching the thing slither around in the darkness.
He knew it devoured small rodents,
slithering up to them,
and grasping them in the powerful jaws,
then swallowing them down the ballooning gullet until
they dissolved in piteous dead terror
in the sleek,
long innards,
digested over a short period
while the writhing body of the predator
expanded to accommodate the meal.
And, thought Null, perhaps that was an apt metaphor
for what the world did to you,
after a fashion.
Small pieces devoured,
digested,
while the writhing snake body ballooned outward from
the pathetic meal.
—The hallways echo of the dead.
—Not a verifiable fact, Luke.
He shambles over to the bed,
throws down his package of cigarettes,
and collapses atop the covers.
Luke's face is ashen, somewhat grey.
—I'm not sure I can take another day here. It's like the
hours just creep by. Like suspended animation. I think
we're in hell.

—That seems more likely. I wonder why they let him keep snakes. And spiders. And that hairy thing.

—Ferret, that's what it's called.

—Yeah.

Luke sat up,
popped a cigarette between his thick lips,
rubbed his beard.

Outside, the sun streamed in,
painting swirls of dust motes in the dim,
stale air.

Null smiled.

Somewhere the light was cracking through the darkness,

rusty swing sets paid testimony

]to the energetic butts of romping children,
and,

while they may very well be confined here,
in this dim,

white,

sterile world,

that didn't mean,

somehow that life was choked away; it meant that THEY
were confined, kept in the solitary cocoon of an institute for the mentally unstable.

The world rose up.

It breathed.

Daylight brought the shuffling hordes out from their
domiciles,

and,
above,
in the vastness of outer space,
you could look down on a big blue marble,
crawling with hideous life,
and ponder.

As you got closer,
the colonies came into view.
Work and play,
sex and death,
life and the promise of tomorrow.

—She's loose!

Null pivoted like a top,
instinctively going for the glass barricade that separated
the dorm room from the rest of the institution.

The snake, the goddamned snake was loose!

He looked in the corners of the room, expecting to see
the fat body slithering

He sat with them in the gathering gloom.

The moments ticked by,
the ticking of the clock falling like hammer falls
upon the window of his skull.

Outside,
cars crept by in the dusty street.

They seemed like images painted on the dark,
shadow strands of air.

Deep and solemn eyes stared back at him from the gathering gloom.

His grandmother,
high,

severe

cheekbones angling up into her bun of iron-grey hair,
folded her hands across her lap.

There was only silence,
the lonely creek of a few boards.

—The neighborhood sure is changing.

—A few more years and no one will want to live
down here.

The boy seemed as if he had ants crawling around
in his pants for a moment. He got up,
fidgeting in the gloom,
Null noticed the dirty feet,
the old, thrift-store clothing,
the unwashed hair.

The boy, his cousin, didn't smell like a rose, either.

—It's getting colder in here.

—I'll turn on a little heat.

She got up to do so.

He could see the familiar hunch of age in her back,
but she still moved spryly in the gloom.

She was a thickset,

powerful old woman,

use to working like a dray horse.

And age fought a battle with habit inside of her.

The thermostat kicked in,
the heating yawned to life like the voice of a ghost
submerged in the dusty corners of the old place.
The chill in the air was still palpable and real.
Null

felt as if he were breathing in darkness.

—Remember a day, many years ago, when you use
to stay with me. You'd stay the whole night,
sleep over here in this bed...

She pointed to the old hospital bed in the corner.
Grandpa had slept there once.
(Before he passed.)

Null nodded.
He well remembered.
Rain began to patter against the glass door.
Tiny,
freezing droplets licking
the walkway outside.
That would make escaping precarious,
he thought,
half-amused.

For a moment
there was nothing but silence,
and the ticking of the clock.
His cousin seemed incapable of speech; Null wondered
at the heavy ridge above his brow.
Was he mentally slow?

He had thick, protuberant lips; he seemed to stink of tragedy.

His legs were brown and frog-like.

Altogether the body of a boy at play.

Grandma loved him.

But there was no love written on her face, Null reflected.

Outside,

the sun dipped behind the straggling trees

up and down the walk.

He could hear the heavy thump of bass down the street.

Black faces walked the cracked pavement,

eyeing the sore sights of the ghetto neighborhood as it settled,

minute by minute,

into the dust of age.

—We'll be moving on soon, I reckon.

Null had an image of them,

together,

walking the rolling hills and little dips of the cemetery grounds. Somewhere, he knew, life still stirred.

—Do you have to go?

He hopped into bed.

He wasn't going to like it here,

he was sure.

First,

there was the neighbor,

and he was likely, it seemed, to pop through a little door

at intervals,
his face overgrown with a scrubby red beard,
and traverse himself across the bedroom,
hiding for a time in the odd,
booth-like water closet.
—But what are you hiding from?
Null would ask, groggily, rubbing his eyes.
He didn't like this place.
It was too small,
too stuffy;
the electric seemed dangerously wired,
and there was a general feeling of sleazy dilapidation
and danger clinging to the walls.
And there were roaches, too.
The man never answered.
Perhaps he thought Null was somehow beneath an answer.
Null invariably rolled over,
bathed in his own sweat,
and fought to go back to sleep.
When he awoke,
his neighbor was always gone.
His aunt commented on the strangeness of this.
—You sure don't get a lot in the way of privacy around here, do you?
—I guess that's the way they have it planned.
The neighbors were an unsavory lot of drug addicts.
Null was always afraid to walk up and down the foul,

ugly halls, too, as many of them had dogs that would
bite,
and not a few of them let their dogs wander
up and down
freely.

We were tasked with the preparation of meals for
each planet.

Now,
each planet represented a different table
All people sitting
at said table
dressed
Oddly enough,
in the traditional garb of whatever alien race
Happened to live upon the surface of their table-planet.
And so we had people with strange costumes
and green paint smeared all over their faces,
and we were to cook hamburgers for these people,
because playing alien made a body hungry
I suppose
I should have been happy just to have honest work

She cut an imposing figure against the sky,
revealed in her simple nudity against the blue,
while around her crabs crept across the hot sands of the
beach.

Waves lapped churlishly at the gaping rocks of the shore,

and gulls made haste overhead,
diving down for fishing,
to gobble up the unwary denizens of the deep.
And didn't we all evolve up from this churning world of
dark greys
and terrifying blues?

—I'm not sure how I came to be here.

Null pivoted like a top,
wanting to follow her wherever she might lead.
The pendulous globes of her white derriere seemed to
beckon insolently. She paid him little mind.
—Perhaps I'm only dreaming?

He called after her.

The sun was setting in the distance.
Before them,
the beach began to bubble upward into a series of hills.
On top of the hills,
an old house perched against the gathering gloom,
empty windows looking off into spaces beyond.
The world was gathering dark
like a shroud of rotten wool.
Null walked,
his shoes growing dusty,
little rocks bothering the soles of his feet.
She turned, intermittently,
and looked at him,
the same strange, smiling expression on her face.
She was drawing him forward.

—Are you even human?

He called after her,
putting his hands to the sides of his mouth.

Shouting for some reason.

The roar of the sea was the roar of the sea,
the wind a dull, whining gale

—but there was no need for shouting.

Finally to the walkway,

as,

on either side the beach gave way to the front lawn.

Surrounded by a wicker gate,

the cracked stone walkway was topped by an arch.

The walk itself was scrawled with the hopscotch scribbling of curiously absent children.

The walk led directly up to the sagging, empty porch.

The yard was overgrown with weeds and old stones.

Null wondered if they were small grave stones.

She stopped at the door,

turned,

and walked through it.

Null stopped for a moment,

wondering just what he had witnessed,

then realized that here,

of all places,

he should learn not to be surprised by anything.

He ascended the stone steps to the front porch,

hearing the wood splinter and groan under his weight.

He put his hand out to the little brass knob,

breathed in,
flung the door open wide.

He stopped for a moment,
considering the scene of darkness beyond.
The room seemed to be choked in dark and dust.
He had no flashlight,
no candle,
no way to light his exploration.
He felt the need to go in anyway,
and so he tiptoed over the threshold,
his lungs choked by the dust and mold.

His awareness growing sharper as his eyes adjusted to
the heavy gloom. Beyond,
he could see a shimmering white rectangle in the darkness.

—Beyond is the place where they prepare the bodies?
He could see her,
radiant,
a shining figure.

She turned in the murk,
her heavy breasts punctuated by deep red nipples.
Her eyes were vacant and full of dreams.
She curled a finger in the gloom,
a white wisp beckoning him.

He crept forward,
not liking the icy envelope of blackness as it surrounded
him on all sides.

—It's stealing the life force, he thought, not at all sure this was correct.

Beyond...

(He was resident psychopath, brooding in the dilapidated place like some mythical ogre.

Step, step, step across the old hardwood floor. Creaking and groaning. Termites probably burrowing themselves into heaven by the chomp of sawdust, as purposeful rat scurried in dark corner awaiting hungry morsel of rubbish.

But still this was his home, his dominion. Hadn't he taken lawful possession of it when the old lady died?

He was aware of changes in the neighborhood, could hear the elephantine creep of slow cars pulsating heavy bass in the wee hours of the morning, selling cocaine to the street people.

—Hey, motherfucker, hey...

So he could sit in the darkness, gun in his lap, listening for ghosts. Outside as daylight exploded across the peeling paint surface of old, weathered dumps, cars full of rampaging lunatics vomited up passengers adorned in tattered rags, in reeking finery, spat out onto the pavement in milling, chaotic throngs, dogs running about in old yards wherein sprouted weeds tall grown through cinderblocks left to decay in old mud and dried soup of rusted tin can and plastic wrapper.)

He took her by the hand.

She looked at him with big, empty eyes.

There was a sort of vapid pleading in them.

He didn't know, exactly, for what she was pleading,
but he supposed it was some internal,
insect need.

—Mad cockroach lust.

—What?

—Nothing.

The place was a confusing mess of subterranean hall-
ways

leading down into the bowels of the earth.

Little tables lining the walls on either side,
and music floating in from above,
where the real partying took place.

—At least you're dressed decently.

He looked down at himself.

It was an improvement over his usual attire,
a zoot suit that might have put an old-time gangland
leader to shame.

He smiled to himself.

Above, they could hear the heavy thump of the music
begin to pound the world into sensual ecstasy.

—But not for me. Never for me.

She looked at him curiously.

He thought,

perhaps,

that all of this had been planned many years in advance,

that,

just maybe, he was the living, breathing actor in someone else's drama. Weren't there metaphysical philosophies that postulated just as much?

He wasn't sure.

He boasted, often, of not being an intellectual.

—Miracle you survived at all.

—Of course. It was a miracle. I can still feel the pain.

—Is it intense?

—Only when I laugh. Freak scene. Not sure exactly how I got out of there. I was surprised when she came in.

—Do you believe the media accounts?

—Unsure. I suppose the whole thing has a surreal aspect to it now. Or maybe it's just the shock of it all. I swear, it took me several minutes to even realize what was going on when she came in with that mask.

—And then the teller?

—And then the teller told her to take it off. And leaned over the counter to pull it off. And that's when the gun came out.

—It looked like some sort of wire, mesh fencing mask.

—Exactly. And then she pulled the gun. I knew, somehow, at this point, that it was a she. She spun around, cursing, a mad viper. She shot me as I sat in the chair. And the world went dark.

—And it was only later?

—I woke up in the hospital.

—Coma?

—Coma. But they said my mind would never be right again. I'm not sure what they meant. Perhaps that is why. He laughed.

They went quickly down the steps,
into the milling throngs filling up the old hallway.

A line of tables were pushed up against the walls.

He spied an old friend,
similarly dressed to himself.

The man had lost weight,
grown a moustache.

He looked up as they passed.

He didn't look pleased.

—He doesn't want to see me again after so many years.
I serve as a reminder of the past. HIS past, which he has
been trying to escape from.

—Maybe he just wants to evolve.

—Silly girl. That's exactly what he wants. But he never
will. His is a lost cause.

We slipped further into the darkness.

Above,

I could hear the pounding of the music,
but the rhythm seemed all wrong,
somehow.

I remember the line from Genet about angels farting
on the ceiling.

We make our way above ground,
to the darkened streets of the marketplace,

sitting ourselves down at at a table.

Conversation mills about uselessly.

I can't keep up with the flow of the words.

—Somehow or other, we're in love.

—I tend to doubt it.

—Are you playing with me?

—No, just jaded after so many years. Besides, how can you be in love with me? You barely know me.

—I am though. I find you to be wonderfully intelligent and sensitive. Caring. Not crass and vulgar, like so many people today.

—For all you know, I'm a cold-blooded killer, an annihilation machine masquerading as a man.

—I doubt it. You don't seem like the type that could hurt a fly, if you don't mind me saying so.

I look down the street.

Darkness and fog has crept up and down;

the shopping and entertainment district. Up the street, the buildings of the university loom

like ancient sentinels in the night. People are coming and going

to various destinations,

some with books shoved under their arms.

Eager students.

I wonder what I'm doing here.

Didn't I have something to study,
something to learn?

She looks exasperated with me,

gets up and pushes her chair in.

—Are you leaving me? I say.

I actually feel a little bit of panic
at the thought of being abandoned out here.

She considers.

The milling throngs are hard to avoid,
even harder to circumnavigate through.

She could disappear into the night,
get lost,
and I would have trouble finding her again.

Or maybe...

—I'm going to get some coffee. You want one?

—Sure.

She heads across the plaza to the coffee stand.

The female barista comes out,
takes her order,
comes back with two steaming paper cups.

She lays down five dollars.

I'm certain it's five dollars.

I can see the money on the counter from where I'm
seated.

She takes both cups in her hands,
looks back and forth across the street carefully,
but there are no cars coming.

She crosses,
holding up each cup carefully,
as if to show me what a good girl she's been.

But there is a little problem.
Each of the cups seems to have sprung a leak.
They start spilling out their contents in two little streams
as she walks, suddenly looks down,
realizes for the first time what I could plainly
see before she even started back across,
and stops in the middle of the street, confused.
Looking around,
obviously embarrassed.
But for what reason, I cannot fathom.
 She drops both the cups,
 comes up to the table,
 leans over me,
so I can see the swell of her breast as she huffs and puffs
with exertion
—I'm going to make it right. Don't worry.
I roll my eyes.
Somewhere,
I realize there must be people who are enjoying their
night
—It's really not necessary, I say.
—Oh, yes, it is. I've got more where that came from. It's
no problem. Wait.
She turns, looks back and forth as if to see if there are
any cars coming
(when the street has been vacant seemingly since we got
out here and sat down)
And then crosses back to the coffee stand.

I sit and consider how plain she really is.
Like a pudgy little boy,
With a little boy's haircut,
And plain features that could hardly be thought of as
beautiful
And pale skin,
But, her eyes are lovely
And she has tremendous wide mama hips and a
Huge ass
Dimpled and fat as a baby's backside...
She repeats the scene with the barrista,
laying down another five dollars.
She turns.
This time she has a couple of glass mugs.
She gets halfway across the street.
She trips, suddenly.
She doesn't fall,
but the mugs go sailing into the street,
where they crack against the pavement.
She stands there again,
her hands still raised as if she is holding the cups.
She looks as if she is going to cry.
I get partly up,
motion to her,
tell her it's okay,
but she looks confused for a moment,
turns about in exasperation, and disappears down the
sidewalk,

—Really, I'm not angry, I say.
But she is long gone.

So I follow,
and right away I am in the thick of the milling throng,
and I realize what is wrong here.

—All of these people must be dead.
I think to myself that I have finally found hell,
as this is a Soylent Green world of overpopulated madness.

I fight against the tide of hustling bodies,
trying to make my way up a short flight of stone steps,
but I am pushed back again and again by the swell of
ambling zombies, who seem to be almost oblivious to
my presence as I fight against their surging,
assault stink.

—I am dead, and this is Hell.
I look for her little form at every turn,
at every opening of the crowd,
but it is like trying for the needle in the proverbial haystack.
Worse.

It is like fighting your way through a churning abyss of
drowning forms, each form disappearing down the rabbit
hole of your hopes and dreams.

I look everywhere,
running,
pushed back,
suffocated,

squeezed in the riot,
but she is nowhere to be seen.
And the milling throng will not be halted or turned
back.

—I am dead and this is Hell.

Silence.

Footfalls do not echo in the void.

The world falls through a prism that projects only vary-
ing shades of grey. Everything is slowed down,
resonant,
the world is a pregnant pause of suffering.

A face cries out in silent agony

Somewhere,
the sun shines down on a dusty scene.

It is a cleft between two hills,
coming out to a dry,
cracked surface of brittle rank grass and dirt streets.

To one side,
the ruins of a dilapidated group of buildings,
encircled by barbed wire,
metal walls rusting in the hot breeze as flies blow their
eggs across space and time.

It is an interesting tableaux,
a collection of bodies suddenly frozen in a macabre moment,
brought to life in the reality of their surroundings. She
is stunned into speechlessness
at the comic grotesqueries before her,
a hideous towering beast of a man wielding a sharp weapon
that looks like a pick axe

Beside her,
her companion begins to step backward,
everything happens in a slow,
graceful way that is quite like a comic dance.
Beyond the capability of physics to accurately reproduce
in a logical manner.

Suddenly,
the axe is thrust forward,

hitting him square in the chest.

She begins to run.

She lay back,

letting him go down between her legs.

—I like it like that partner. I really do.

His head is a curly,

tousled mess of mop-like hair.

He has olive skin,

bad teeth,

is big in the way a classically handsome man is supposed to be.

Square jaw.

Unhappy, sodden eyes,

with an occasional brilliant flash of psychopathy in them.

White T-shirt stained with tobacco juice and motor oil.

His name might be Frank.

She grabs fistfuls of his hair,

rocking his head back and forth.

It is all comically grotesque,

a freak scene from a bad movie.

His eyes bug out in pleasure.

The door behind them bursts open.

The man in the doorway stands there in utter disbelief.

His hands are held down at his sides,

and he is shaking.

He looks like he is on the verge of some sort of fit.

He suddenly rushes forward,
tears Frank away from his little snack.

Yells something unintelligible.

Frank wipes his mouth,
stands up to his full height.

He towers over the other man.

He smiles.

—Nice to see you again, Larry.

Oh, I hope you don't mind me and Deborah getting acquainted.

—We were bored, baby. You ever do anything just because you got bored? Not serious.

She rolls over,
buries half her face sheepishly in the pillow.

Larry comes forward,
his hands held out like bitter, twisted claws.

Frank, seemingly, can't believe what he's seeing,
but he looks amused.

—How could you? How could you do this to me? You told me...

His voice squeaks down to a pathetic, sobbing whisper.

He's a skinny twerp of a man
with a sandy brown moustache,
deep, hollow pits under his eyes,
a weak chin,
and a bald pate.

His hair curls out over his ears in little brown,

wispy tendrils.

His chest is heaving beneath his sweater.

His jeans droop in the ass,

and his sneakers are dogged out and filthy.

He looks like he hasn't shaved in awhile.

—Been hitting the sauce, Larry?

Frank tilts his head and gives a forced look of concern.

Larry can see,

even through the bloodshot eyes,

that Frank is fighting to hold back laughter.

—You're toying with me, aren't you, you fuck. You always were a sadistic fuck, Frank. Well, I can't whip you, Frank, I know that. But I damn sure know where all the bodies are buried, you fuck. Yeah. I know that much.

Frank raised a chilly eyebrow.

Outside, he could hear his son come in,

go to the fridge,

get himself a beer.

—Hey, dad?

—In here, Junior. Me and Debbie just having a little talk.

—Whose car is that outside?

—Uh...it belongs to the milkman?

Silence.

—The milkman...right.

He can hear junior smile,

he tromps off to his room,

slams the door,

cranks Metallica at top volume.

—That's good. That ought to provide plenty of cover, thinks Frank.

Larry ambles around in a little circle,
his head cast down,
looking exhausted.

Frank feels his hands go tight,
tense,
badly wanting to squeeze themselves around Larry's scrawny neck.

—I can't believe you could betray me like this...
His pale, shaky, skinny hand wipes across his eyes,
hot tears splashing his fingers,
dampening his sleeves.

Frank towers over him like a giant,
an ogre.

—C'mon, Larry, I'm in a killing mood, he thinks.
Deborah rolls back over,
spreads her legs,
puts her hands to her crotch.

—No need to fight over me boys. There's plenty to go around.

Suddenly,
Larry looked as if he might explode out of his skin.
He leapt from the foot of the bed,
his hands grasping out for her neck,
just as Frank caught him by the scruff of his collar.

—Oh, no, you don't, Larry!

He pulled him back sharply,
his arms flailing out on emptiness,
his hands missing their intended target.
Frank held him up like a rag doll,
looked at him as if he were a strange fish dredged up
from the ocean floor.

—You going to play nice? Or does this have to get rough?

Larry was sniveling,
choking back tears and snot.

—I'll be good, I swear. Just...just let me be. I just need
time...

Frank jerked him around a little,
then let him go.

Larry swayed on his feet for a moment before collapsing
on the carpet in a blubbering heap.

Deborah looked over at him with quiet contempt.

She traded glances with Frank.

She could see the lightening in his eyes.

He seemed to be smiling or grimacing,
she couldn't tell which.

—Does this pain you?

She thought at him.

She had read somewhere that particularly close lovers
could often read each other's thoughts.

Frank bent over, his shadow falling across Larry's back.

He closed in.

Larry closed his eyes.

Someone moaned.

The room seemed to grow dark for a moment,
and a cold chill swept in from somewhere.

(But this all seems melodramatic...)

Once,

when I was a boy,

I went to visit a friend.

He was a little man with frazzled, limp hair cascading
over his shoulders, a jean vest with heavy metal patches,
and bad tattoos.

He lived in a run-to-riot Midwestern dump house
at the edge of a field.

Houses straggled onward up the road,
more dumps.

Behind him yawned a shitty, rusted trailer court.

The weekends saw police cruisers there on domestic dis-
turbances.

We spent a day together recording music,
or some facsimile of in the first or second degree.

I remember it was a bitter,

bone-creeping Indiana cold that got deep inside your
skin

and made you feel alienated from the world.

His eyes told me he was tired.

Perhaps too much life had snookered him,
made him weak,

somehow,

when it should have made him strong.

His chief habits were beer and cigarettes.
I could feel a deep, creeping cold in the filthy little place,
as we circumnavigated the junk equipment,
and I dealt with the stench,
and the cold,
and the feeling of growing increasingly famished from
an all-day diet of beer and smokes.
He,
they,
had a runty homeless man living with them.
For what reason I couldn't discern.
Nor, at the end of this particular day,
did I care,
as my ears were ringing and my stomach was growling
and I felt a weariness I knew was not a decent trade for
the day I had just spent.
I settled down on the floor while he put on his coat.
The four of us were going to load into the van and take
me home.
I looked up on the wall.
The place was a repository of junk collection,
and the walls were heavy with shelves full of old alcohol
bottles
and pictures and videocassettes and unspeakable tro-
phies and toys from fast food restaurants.
And the place seemed to radiate dull,
brown emptiness.

—You know where I got that? He says, pointing a gnarled, tattooed finger at two portraits hanging on the wall.

The portraits are creepily incongruous with the rest of the décor; they're apparently posters of two old Victorians.

I could have sworn the woman looked like she could be his great grandmother.

—Been in the family for years? I say, half jokingly.

I can't figure it.

The rest of the pictures are fairly normal shots of him with guns,

redneck buddies,

his once attractive blonde daughter

(who withered down into perpetual grey under the strain of her dismal, bitter life)

—No. Back when I was a manager at McDonald's, they were renovating. Redecorating. They brought in all this stuff and stored it in the basement. Anyway, they didn't use some of it, just kept it down there. And then the owner said he was going to just pitch a lot of it, and that I could take what I wanted to. So I took that. Sort of thought it looked gothic.

I sort of thought it looked ridiculously out of place, but I didn't say anything.

I looked at the picture of the man.

He seemed to have the exact same old-fashioned handlebar moustache as my friend,

and I did a double-take realizing they weren't related.

It could have been his great, great grandfather or something.

And then I felt it.

The hollow, cold feeling,
creeping in.

The feeling of suffocating reality,
wiping away every illusion and pale imitative trick of life,

as the three of them sat there with their faces working
in unison,

tiny twitches and spasms of muscle and ticks reflected
back by the interplay of light and shadow
emanating from an old florescent in the ceiling.

And it's still so dark.

The boards of the walls and floor seem to encase us,
like a giant coffin.

—I can feel it in here.

The Angel of Death.

But of course I don't say this.

I feel panic grip my chest,
as everything seems to go tight.

My friend puts his bony, tattooed hands on his skinny
knees,

looks,
for all the world,

as if he isn't perturbed or disturbed by anything.

We experience a moment of confused silence; the old
lady has leaned back very far on the couch, her little tits

pressing against her blouse.

I find it hard not to be distracted,
but then a cold spasm of the sucking wind hits me in
the chest again,
and I feel cold terror isolate me,
taking me down into a world as lonely and terrifying
and void as any I've ever experienced.

Everything looks ugly and predatory.
Outside, a massive dog patrols the backyard in lazy,
sleepy movements of subtle,
raw power.

Massive jaws work greedily at old bones
chewed tough and brittle and white,
picked clean like the raw flesh of the falling house,
the fading day,
the bitter, black onset of an interminable, cold night.
—I am become death, destroyer of worlds.

Runs through my head,
but I don't say this.

Later, I settle back into the backseat of a van,
watch runty, disintegrating little houses pass street by
black street, shadows hiding their secrets,
mixing cold night with the heavy electric brightness
of traffic signal
and illuminated signs proclaiming the variant wonders
of so many fast food establishments.
It is all freezing concrete,
and plexiglass,

and plastic and prefab buildings,
and I can feel cold terror seep into my bones,
and it is a feeling like the hollow pits of empty,
desiccated time.

—Am I making any sense? No. I didn't think so.

—What's that you're saying?

He leans over in the seat,
his hair spilling out in worried,
stringy curls above his collar
He needs a shave and a shampoo.

I should be surprised by a dying man in the clutch of
such slovenly habits?

—Nothing. I was just rambling to myself.

I reassure him.

The old lady continues to drive.

Outside, the city sits like a canker on the lip of an aging
whore.

And that whore is called TIME.

So I could feel the presence of death when it was there.

Because he did die,

soon after,
of a malignant tumor,
after having his tongue cut away.

I called up one day after not having spoken to him in
two years,

and suddenly the wife
(the new wife)

answered and informed me he couldn't come to the phone;
he would never come to the phone again, it seemed.

So...

They had collected a number of bright and ghoulish masks.

Mixed in were the various skulls and severed craniums they had collected in their travels.

Being extraterrestrial was a minor point with them; they adapted well to whatever environment they happened to find themselves in.

The boy never suspected anything of his dad and mum.

In fact,

he simply went to school like a dutiful son,

did his homework,

maintained good grades...

he never asked questions,

or got too close to the truth.

The other kids at school liked him just fine.

His mother rarely got up from the bed.

—He assumes that I'm sick. He doesn't know.

Frank adjusted his tie,

looked into the mirror,

wondered if he did or didn't like what he saw there.

Maybe next time he would be a woman; a few fake tits and some makeup; science could take care of the rest.

This whole suburban freak scene was for the birds, he figured.

—It does seem to have some advantages, though.

—What's that you're saying?

—Nothing, honey. I was just thinking out loud. But,

really, could you think of a better cover for two people like us? I mean, no one ever suspects a thing.

—It's because we're wealthy and good looking. Such people are above suspicion in this society. If we were ugly, poor drug addicts...we couldn't get away with all that we do.

A solid line of severed heads moves across a conveyer belt.

She leans forward,

examining the alien characteristics of heads collected from various and sundry planets,

heads with huge tusks,

sharp fangs,

horns,

heavy,

ridge-like brows,

white,

cadaverous skin.

Monstrous heads.

Some of them were still human.

—Larry.

Larry's head looked like a giant bald turnip.

His mouth was frozen in a rictus of pain and suffering.

His eyes were wide twin moons,

and a trickle of blood had run down from his nose and lips and dried

....his skin had the cadaverous hue of death.

They had shaved his head.

She took the little glass bubble from his mouth,
inserted it into her own.

The conveyer rolled onward as she sat up in bed,
pushing the covers back,
and opening the glass doorway on the little box...

—Cooker. Looks like a microwave.

She fed the head inside.

It would be immolated,
turned to ash.

She sat back.

She could feel the little glass ball begin to vibrate in her
mouth.

She imagined her teeth and lips would glow in the dark.

When I got back there, the blacks had disappeared,
but now there are a number of young girls in black school-
girl dresses sitting around in the empty room that use
to be my bedroom.

One of them is clearly the teenaged leader of this little
coven.

—We have one hundred hours to get ready.

—Think we can do it?

She looks confident and pert.

I'm feeling like a fusty old poop
standing out like a sore thumb.

They have instruments tucked under their little arms,
and there's a drum kit in the corner.

Amplifiers.

On the television set
a corporate logo glides by in animated wonder.

A collection of images of some stadium somewhere.

Looks like some sort of mass celebration,
maybe a rock 'n' roll Nuremburg rally.

I make that the girls in the band are wanting to play at
this event.

I leave the room,
let them rest up for their one hundred hours away gig,
walk out into the hall.

There's some sort of commotion out there.

Mother is talking to a room full of mysterious people.

Or, at least one mysterious person.

I realize everyone else looks vaguely familiar.

I'm not sure what the hell they're discussing,
except a young man in a John Deere cap comes out and
sets a mirror down in the hallway off the living room.

Mother gets up,

and is still talking; I get the impression they're discussing something eerie.

—And they say the image froze there. But I think it has to be painted on.

—Frosted on, somehow.

Mother bends over,

runs her hands over a large white shape on the surface of the glass, stands back up.

—You can see it coming into focus,
she says,

leaning back against the wall,
her hands behind her.

The young man in the John Deere cap bends down.

I notice he's dressed like my father,
like I remember my father dressing,
when I was a boy.

He has on an ugly yellow shirt,
looks like it came straight from some damned Goodwill store and is twenty years out of style.

The top button is opened up,
and his chest hairs are curling out.

—Just like dad, I think to myself, smiling.

His jeans are almost bell bottoms,

and they're pretty much just as ratty and used-looking as the shirt.

His hair is longish in the back and curly.

Altogether, he looks like he stepped from an 1980s time warp.

I look down at the mirror.

I am surprised to note it doesn't look like an antique; it actually looks rather cheap,

like something that was purchased at a cheap furniture outlet.

But there is a mysterious,

frosted white image coming down,

like an acute stain,

from the right top of the glass.

I put my fingers out,

but I don't touch the surface of the glass out of fear.

—What happened here? How did that get on the glass?

The man in the Goodwill clothes shrugs,

says,

—That's what we'd like to know. I mean, there are conflicting stories.

He doesn't bother to fill me in on any of the details.

All of a sudden,

I hear what I take to be guitar strumming going on down the hall,

in the back room,

and I go down the hall to see what my Catholic school girl rock band is gearing up to play.

—There's something going on here with the church, am I right? I mean, I distinctly remember the last time I had to visit the clinic, the tall, handsome Catholic priest sitting on the little stool, worried and uneasy in the gloom of a disused examination room. I walked in with Mother, not exactly sure what I had been summoned there for, and he took one look at me and he starts telling me how the —Vatican Police are going to come for him, and I wonder just what the hell he is talking about, but then one of the nurses comes for me and we never get to hear the rest of the conversation.

—That man isn't going to be around here long, she says,
He was sitting there on a stool,
hunched over,
a big nervous wreck of a man.

Someone takes me outside
(I guess it is my nurse)
and shows me a newspaper article.

—People are saying he's the Antichrist. Pretty weird, huh?

I look down at the paper.

There's a picture of a well-dressed man in a suit on the front of the page. Crickets chirp in the distance.

Outside here,
there are no cars at the end of the dirt drive.

—Why couldn't it be paved, I wonder, then go back inside the clinic.

I wonder at the strangeness of the place,

the creeping dark halls that disappear into shadows,
and the way it seems to be laid out to make no sense.

—I'm not even sure what I'm doing here,
I complain to someone sitting behind what appears to
be a nurse's station.

What am I supposed to be sick with?

I want to ask mother,
who has disappeared again mysteriously.

She controls the reigns of my life,
remembers what needs remembering.

I sit down exasperated,
think back to the strange incident in the pool...

Two lines of people trudging up and down,
outside of an elevated building
(was this another medical center? It seemed like it.)
down the stairs,
to dip in the pool.

Was it a ritual of baptism?

Splashing around in the water,
aimlessly trying to classify this experience as something
meaningful. People in the pool trying desperately to avoid
contact.

—Does it infect you somehow?

The woman splashes away,
holding her hands out in front of her face.

I move toward her,
but she physically jerks aside,
trying to escape,

moving backwards in the water as if I were going to physically ravage her.

Which made little sense,

as I didn't seem to be in the physical condition to ravage anyone.

Everyone seemed to come to a general consensus about when they had had enough water,

as the milling throngs in the pool seemed to generally move back to the other edge of the horse shoe,

up the stone steps,

ankles splashing heavily,

and forming themselves into a line on the painted wooden staircase that led up the side of one of the houses.

I trudged upward,

not sure if my legs could support my weakened body, feeling as helpless as a child,

but realizing all the while that the line of swimmers was ascending upward to a sort of platform-like ledge outside a window.

This was very high up.

I looked over, and I could see a line of swimmers coming down from the clinic across the yard.

I wanted badly to call over to some of them.

Just out of curiosity to know if anyone knew just what in hell was actually going on.

I kept getting a mental image of helmeted guards standing besides clean, white marble statues of Greek heroes ... Each of the soldiers had a jointed truncheon,

face a hard mask of conditioned hostility.

Uniforms black.

The statues

sprouted microphones and loudspeakers

where genitals should be.

I could tell that someone had leveled the city,

had started to rebuild,

perhaps thinking they could rebuild the grandeur and
glory of Rome.

—Was this the work of the Antichrist?

I wondered out loud,

going back into the clinic,

forgetting to check and see what time it was.

It seemed like interminable night had descended upon
the face of the world.

The scene shifts.

The snow falls heavily,
like a white blanket of death around the encampment.
She walks like a sleepwalker over the frozen waste,
her feet crunching the icy,
frosted grit of the stony earth.

Around her,
scattered upon the ground,
are the slaughtered remains of so many cadavers...
She looks upward,
wailing,
her arms outstretched.

She has awakened in the middle of a nightmare.
She turns,
follows the trail of blood through the snow,
past clumps of hair,
twists of ragged clothing blowing in the harsh, bitter
wind.

A few forms move in the firelight
as blood drips down through the snow,
pooling in little whorls and dips,
shining black in the fading light.

The forms are withered,
scarecrow personages.

Emil wraps an old cloak about his form,
bends over the pot, stirring.

Some of them wear freshly-killed furs.

Some of them the tattered remnants of old military uniforms.

Her mind flashes forward and backward in time.

—Something sometimes brings the beast up in us.

—The law of survival?

—Is it really so important? I suppose this is what we were born to.

Out there, in the swirling snow,
tiny black shadows seem to flicker like dying ghosts in
and out of the edge of vision.

The cold is a biting knife.

She feels numb to all sensations.

Insensate.

Not fully conscious.

Slipping in and out of a reverie that is equal parts apathy
and shock.

—But perhaps I distance myself so I can cope with the
reality of it?

He approaches her.

His rail-thin body is covered by a thin, threadbare blanket.

Skeletal fingers clutch the fabric tighter around him.

He looks as if he has a bone in his throat.

—I was hungry. And Felix had succumbed to the cold.
So I cut open his tender little ass, and I ate it.

The fire crackled and spat.

Images huddled together in misery.

The encampment teetered on the edge of devastation,

weak,

flimsy shelters blown precariously to and fro in the icy gale.

—But somehow this is all just a harbinger of what is to come. Can't you see that? We've crossed over, somehow. Back To the time when men lived as beasts...

Her voice trailed off.

The wind blew her hair like a filthy crown around her aching skull.

She ran a sandpaper tongue over cracked, bleeding lips.

He turned,

his skull-like visage peering off into the distance.

His eyes were twin black emeralds glowing in the fire-light.

—Out there, they talk about the Wendigo. A creature that walks like a man,

—is rail thin,

—can't see him if he turns sideways

...what do you think of that, eh? He's supposed to drive men mad... Mad with the desire to eat human flesh.

But, even as he spoke, she could see that things were now beyond words. They had regressed, crossed some taboo borderland or boundary that was not meant to be crossed.

—But did we really have a choice? It was this, or die a terrible, lingering death.

He looked back at her with eyes that seemed as hollow

and empty as the shifting shadows
swallowing up the last vestiges of daylight.
Out there,
in the beyond,
between eyes squinted shut against the hurling gale,
she could see dark figures trudging,
erect,
against the bitter, killing winds.

—Men?

They don't seem like men.
They seem like tall, skinny, walking black shadows
framed against the blowing,
violent drifts,
illuminated against the harsh flames of the moon.
She can see them walking in a line.

—The demons. They're out there.

—They're in here. Look around you. Unless, of course,
you still think that all of this is a dream.

(She turned, sloshing in the black snow, held her hands
out as if to examine the palms for the wounds of Christ.
She looked to the stars, arrayed above in twinkling sav-
agery, and she suddenly knew she was an animal. She
cried silently to a world that doesn't care, where the an-
guished sound of tears disappears into the howling gale.
Around her, the dead freeze in bitter, bluing clumps.
What remains of them will be perfectly preserved by
the hard, frozen earth, until, when Spring brings the

first blooms and shoots of green, vines and tendrils will curl like fat, leafy worms, through the crevices of their naked, picked-apart skeletons. All was.)

She approached two shivering, miserable crones bent over a burbling iron pot.

Beneath,
she can feel the warmth of the struggling fire.

She looks down into the burbling,
black water.

Someone has tossed in a foot,
boot and all,
and it floats to the surface.

She turns,
vomits,
turns back to the pot,
wiping her lips on her filthy,
tattered sleeve.

Around her, the brutal smear of death freezes on the
snow,

the mass slaughter piled around
on a dark night too cold for the hungry mandibles
of buzzing flies.

The world shuts an eye to their doom.
It could be a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand years
ago; it is mankind descending into the bestiality of a
savage, hungry dark.

But now I am looking at two separate newspaper articles.

—I can't understand what is going on.

My mouth works soundlessly.

I can feel my bottom lip begin to squeeze out tears.

—Take a good long look. Do you notice anything strange?

It's the man in the John Deere cap.

He's put on a pair of aviator sunglasses,

is looking older,

more tired.

His hands are skinny and shake a little.

He's wearing a cheap ring.

The living room darkens down,

a cloud passes over the sun.

—I see two newspaper articles. Is that some sort of story about murder?

—Some sort, he says, with a sheepish grin.

—Look, two stories about cannibalism in the same paper. This first one, this man killed his entire family I think—

I looked at the paper.

The pictures on the front cover are quite gruesome.

—It's really hard to tell what happened just based on that. The story is very confusing.

Indeed, there appears to be a picture of an idol or effigy, like some grim thing a primitive tribe might carve to ward demons away.

Was this supposed to represent a decayed cadaver?

The second picture and article were easier to process, logically.

The picture was of a small army of cops rooting through an old cemetery, an abandoned spot somewhere in the country.

Old tombstones,
weathered by a century of rot,
their faces washed away until the inscriptions on them were damn near unreadable.

Null could almost see the cops moving through the thick weeds of the place,
bending over,
examining the creeping remains of so many vandalized markers.

Tombstones leaning
like chipped, rotten teeth
from the grubby,
weedy soil.

—Apparently some wise citizen kidnapped a little girl.

—And he dumped her body in that old graveyard?

—Not the first time he's done it. Serial killer. He can't remember where, exactly, the bodies are all buried. He has a general idea in some cases. So they take him out on these little excursions. Buy him chicken dinners and give him good cigarettes, and he fesses up, spits up the details what he can remember. The body of little Angelique is buried somewhere out there.

Turning, he moves back down the hallway on wobbling feet.

Sometime earlier,

he remembered the dream he had of being back in the prison.

Sitting in the day room with half a dozen other convicts,

flipping through a pack of cheap trading cards.

—I have nothing but Rocky Horror Picture Show here.

—I have some cards that are infinitely more interesting

He flips open a deck of pornographic playing cards.

Photos of Chinese women, I think.

—I'll trade you a few of these for a few of those.

Later,

someone has me next to him in bunk,

his long arms around me,

his rigid cock stabbing my ass through my shorts.

We're watching a pornographic film on television.

On television,

a young woman of Asian extraction is leaning back in a bed which seems to be floating in limbo.

She has tremendous,

surgically-augmented breasts.

She leans back,

her face a mask of contorted ecstasy.

The place is small, stifling.
It seems to be falling down around them.
It's a shack out on the edge of a rundown neighborhood,
a Midwestern dump house with a sagging porch.
The porch is covered in rusted junk,
old buckets,
plastic trash bags and other detritus.
Next to it is a yawning,
weed-choked yard.
Behind,
across run-to-riot backyards,
is a trailer park rotting under the hot Indiana sun.
Across the street is another vacant lot.
—There's something I can't quite remember.
He looks out across the street at the lazy swarm of flies
gathering around the body of a dead cat.
His mind flashes back to a scene,
years ago,
when He was walking in an area very close to here.
It was a hot, sleepy summer day,
and he was dripping sweat as he walked in back of fast
food restaurants, past rundown shopping centers,
across the street from bustling factories.
Traffic was heavy down Miller Avenue; car stereos blasted
the latest pop tunes from yawning windows,
while lazy drivers leaned their elbows out,
one hand clasping the steering wheel as time sped up
on the hamster wheel,

clicking along and going nowhere at the same time.
The sun was scorching down on his shoulders,
the armpits of his tunic were soggy with sweat,
and his long hair was in his eyes.

But, as young as he was, he still felt relatively good.
Excellent, in fact.

He was coming around the parking lot of the chicken
joint,
which had since changed hands and was now owned by
Greeks who served Gyro sandwiches,
when he spied the bloated cadaver of a dead kitty,
boiling in the hot July sun.

He fancied he could see shimmering waves of steam
coming off of it as he approached slowly,
icy shock suddenly curling in his belly,
slowing everything down,
blotting out the rumble and honk of the traffic,
the pop music blare of so many deafening radios.
A swarm of flies darted to and fro across the surface
of the corpse, insects eager to lay their eggs in the fast-
decaying flesh,
devouring what they could,
using the dead surface of an alien world to preserve their
own fleeting, illusory existences.

—The thing was obviously filled with gasses.

He wondered what had happened,
realized that next moment that the thing must have
been hit by a car crossing the street

...and maybe someone dragged the little kitty out of the road.

Or maybe it crawled to the little grass embankment at the side of the parking lot,
and gave up the ghost.

Either way,

it was a rapidly expanding balloon of sickening decay.

He stalled for a moment,

transfixed by the image,

then turning on quivering legs and walking slowly away,
feeling his gorge rise.

He had barely kicked up dust when he thought he heard
a weird,

low,

absent sound

...like a repressed fart at a dinner party,

a sound that was more inferred tension and rumble than
anything else. He sensed that something was happening
behind him,

turned to look at the cat again.

He felt his gorge rise.

Perhaps if he had just eaten,

he might have doubled up and puked right there,
projecting vomit all over his shoes.

As it was,

Though,

he felt his throat go still and tight,

felt his mind go a little numb with amazement,

as he witnessed something he knew, immediately, was rare.

Whether it was the intense heat of the day,
or the built up gastric emissions of the dead cat being released,

or some combination of that and the work of predatory insects,

he was startled—astounded really—to suddenly see the cat begin to burst outward,

like some sort of macabre pastry stuffed full of gooey raspberry filling. There was nothing appetizing, though,

about the gruesome slop pushing its way through the dirty fur,

as the dead cat began to wear its insides on the outside of its stiff little husk.

He wondered if the flies would eat the eyes.

—It was a bad day for you, I guess,
is what he said, lamely.

He turned,

now not even revolted,

simply puzzled at the finality of things.

His mind couldn't wrap itself around the mysteries of creation,

of life and death,

and was uneasy because of what he had just seen.

—Eaten. Everything in nature is eaten, eventually.

He thought about the animals he ate.

One day,
assuming his carcass wasn't consumed by fire,
they would lower him into the ground,
and,
eventually he knew,
he would become food for something else.
The entire cycle of things seemed to be one continuous
circle of need, consumption,
and death.
He got up to take a piss.
Mother was with him.
—Should you really be standing here?
She didn't answer him.
For all he knew,
she never even heard him speak.
—Maybe if this is simply a dream from childhood, he
reflected.
—Perhaps I'm still asleep, and this is simply a symptom
of some sort of buried guilt.
He wasn't sure.
The bathroom was in one of the cul-de-sacs of the old
place,
the old Victorian,
but it had apparently been renovated at some point.
There were lime green tiles,
new shower and bath fixtures; the entire effect was one
of age and opulence,
distinction and class.

So he was surprised to find out that the urinal was merely a drain in the floor.

—Go ahead. You know you have to go.

He didn't want to expose himself in front of his mother.

The relationship was strained as it was.

But before he knew it, he had exposed his penis,
which was quite large and firm.

He was suddenly pissing five streams,
like a corrupted hose, and he wondered at this.

—It must be some sort of sickness or affliction.

He was pissing what appeared to be strips of duct tape.

They shot out of his penis painlessly,

landing in little grey,

folded-over strips in cracks and corners of the room.

His mother shuffled around,

looking at the little strips.

He was afraid she might actually pick one up,

but he didn't caution her not to.

—I don't see how you manage to soak the floor so thoroughly. Your aim isn't bad.

—There's something strange about that, true. It's like, no matter what I do, I can't help but piss on the floor.

—I think you get up in the middle of the night and piss and forget about it. Or are too asleep to realize what you're doing.

—You may be right.

They were later climbing the squared staircase up to the back hallway when she suddenly said:

—You have a spirit with you, always. A ghost. This is why the piss on the floor...

He stopped to consider.

This was probably true, he reflected.

But he didn't see any connection.

—I don't see how one follows from the other.

—Some sort of paranormal manifestation? Like stigmata, except with urine.

—Piss. I suppose the corruption is real enough. Maybe piss is just a manifestation of that possession.

The rest of the day faded into darkness.

It was later,

when he was back at school,

that he began to realize that something was definitely wrong.

—I need to see Mr. Velasquez. I have to see him about that chair.

Indeed,

it was a remarkably ordinary piece of furnishing.

Black and uncomfortable looking.

He wasn't exactly sure what sort of importance it might have had for him, but for some reason, he needed it returned.

The house itself tilted upward on hydraulic jacks.

The porch remained stationary.

The Sheriff walked away from the door,

looked at him over a withered nose,

with eyes that seemed to say

—We're sharing something secret between us, something that can't quite be explained.

—Well, can you explain it?

The Sheriff eyed him quizzically,

disbelieving that he could be so stupid.

—Well, don't you smell that smell?

Indeed, it seemed as if he could smell the smell of gas seeping out.

The porch columns were pulled away to reveal the phony façade of the whole hideous structure.

Inside,

though he couldn't hear it because of the soundproofing,

women and children were screaming in terror.

But soon,

the deadly cyanide gas would eliminate their suffering.

—Didn't the Nazis tell their victims they were going to be deloused? Didn't they give them a bar of soap, as if they were going to take a shower?

Inside,

party balloons burst,

children screamed in terror.

Soundproofed walls hid everything.

Later,

he stood by the chain link fence,
smoking a cigarette.

The rest of them were a hideous trio of goons,
blowing tattered clothing drawing the occasional flies.
He didn't know them,
really,

not in any sense that was intellectually comprehensible.

Their eyes were deep,
dung pits of hollow insanity,
reflecting worminess and sloth and hatred and animalism and nothing at all.

—You remind me of the family I visited once.

—The Rat people. The filthy ones...

—We're all rat poop...people around these parts.

One of them laughed,
a hideous dragging guffaw like the warped rubber sounds
of tires on wet pavement.

The day brooded around them,
caught in an infinite moment of clarity.

One of them turned,
pointed off into the distance.

In the distance,
a number of children were ringed around a giant stone
that looked like a clenched hand growing from the soil.
—Some sort of connection to the distant past.

He got up that morning
anticipating a special breakfast.
After all,
wasn't it his birthday?
He could already see that his little friends had assembled for the party.
It looked like it was going to be a faux Christmas celebration.
—You'd think he was Baby Jesus,
said his Aunt Becky,
shaking her head over a cup of coffee
as smoke ringed her old, haggard face.
His mother put another present on top of the table.
The table top was already groaning and heaving with an accumulation of colored packages.
He went to the window overlooking the field.
Outside,
pointing upward to the stillborn sky,
the giant stone finger stood as implacable as it ever had.
It would be a gathering place,
altar,
for the children.
—What's that?
He spied something then,
just out of the corner of his vision.
Something fantastic coming into focus,
crawling into the area of his brainscape,

surfacing like a torpedo cutting through the murk of his early morning haze.

A building.

An old building.

Where in the world—

—Of course it's always been there. You've just never noticed it before. His mother seemed world-weary, tired of his puerile bullshit; his Aunt continued to wrap presents

(how many damn presents?),

his playmates and younger siblings continued to fuss with balloons and party hats.

He went back to the window,
peeped out of the filmy curtain,
squinted in the relative bright of high noon.

Unmistakably an ancient stone building.

Looked as if it had been transported whole from some 1913 city block. The architecture was old, even as young and inexperienced as he was, he could see that.

—There seems to be someone staring at me out of the window.

He turned to his mother with a quizzical face,
as if to say,

—Don't you, at least, find all of this fascinating?

His mother continued to squeeze pink frosting in toothpaste-like streamers around the surface of the white layer cake.

She was paying him not the least bit of attention.

He rubbed his eyes,
pinched himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming,
then ran outside into the yard.

The building was situated,
strangely enough,
directly to the side of his house,
and must have occupied several stories.

—That wasn't here before!

Said his little brother,
accusingly holding out a pointed finger,
as if scolding the mysterious building for its bad man-
ners.

He put his arms across his chest and considered; he was
not so old that such a situation would fluster him un-
duly; one supposes children can see around the surfaces
of things, to the deeper, strange truths implicit in all as-
pects of life.

—I know,
he said to his little brother.

He looked down at him,
then back up to the building.

In the window, he could see a dark figure staring down
at him.

There were two black men in 1914 suits,
bowler caps,
string ties,
staring down out of the window.

They seemed to be as flustered as he felt looking up at them,

but one of them managed to wave stiffly,
and smile.

—Lord, Huddy, it looks as if we done traveled a piece.
I'm so hungry I could eat a horse.

—All this moving through space and time makes a body
thirsty, too.

He upended a bottle of red wine to his lips,
pulled,
wiped his chin.

—Look at that white boy down there. You ever seen
such a strange lookin' boy in all your born days?

Huddy narrowed his eyes to slits, leaned closer to the
window, said.

—Do you mark this? Hamlet's father.

—Shakespeare?

—I ain't afeard of haints, Dollar Jim, but I swares that
thar boy looks a might peculiar to be among the world
of livin' men.

—P'raps we the ones that look peculiar to him, Huddy.
Anyways, last I remember, the Kluckers was chasing us
on account of they claimed we was makin' eyes at a white
woman. Chased us in here, as I remember, then every-
thing gets kind of dark...

—Good thing, too. Soon as we entered this here domi-
cile, we found ourselves transported, as it were, just as
sure as that little girl in that Wizard of Oz book. Maybe

he's an elf or some damn thing.

—Maybe he ain't real at all.

—Maybe he's just an illusion. So much of my life seems as if it could have been nothing more than one of my fever dreams.

—P'raps we call down to him, Jim, he'll answer

...We can establish a rapport.

—If he don't, he ain't real. And this all really is just some crazy dream.

Dollar Jim popped open the window,

leaned out,

said,

—Boy! Hey, you down there!

He stopped for a minute,

uncertain as to how to continue,

before saying,

—Hello there, son! How are you doin' today. And ain't it a lovely day?

Pause.

—My name's Jim. What's yours? Holler back if you can hear me.

He rolled over in bed.

His friend was snoring beside him.

The two of them had shared a bed on many occasions.

—Okay, but why now, when he's so close to death?

The kids had ruled the roost all day,

tiring the old man out.

It had been a trek around the neighborhood,

mired in confusion,

people coming and going.

At one point he had tired of the confusion,

had thrust his hands in his pockets,

and had gone walking,

past little dump palaces with sagging porches,

weed-choked, yards,

yapping,

snarling dogs tied with chain to spokes in the yard.

As the sun was setting,

he realized he had better be getting back.

He had gone inside.

The wife was apparently still at work,

but at least the children and other visitors were now gone.

He went inside,

not liking the cold of the place,

the empty,

cavernous feeling one got

as soon as one entered the little box dump; it really did look bigger on the inside than it did from outside.

He didn't know what to say.
His friend was seated in a chair,
in the dark,
staring,
with sweat and tears rolling, in cold streams,
down his face.

—You keep that up, you'll be pissing icicles.

He didn't say anything. He barely turned his head to
acknowledge him. His eyes told the story of his exhaus-
tion.

Above him,
a single strip of flypaper held dozens and dozens of tiny
insect bodies, frozen forever in their final rictus of death.

He looked off into shadow

And the man sat down,

folding his hands in his lap

But what could he possibly do for him?

He was going to die,

of that there could be little doubt.

—You know, it threw me for a real loop when I called
and they said you couldn't come to the phone. I knew I
had to come and see you.

He looked away

into darkness.

Above him,

posters of Motorhead and Metallica hung

side-by-side

with old movie posters,

family photos,
and a few odd pictures.

Near the door, an old diptych of two Victorians stared
out blankly into the gloom.

Two people that had been dead for over a hundred years.
Death felt real and personal in the stifling confines of
the place.

They sat in stunned silence for a moment.

Null knew that he was probably being blamed,
along with God

and whatever cruel fates had ordained that he now be
sitting here

with no voice box.

So Null hadn't seen him in years.

Like Donald Sutherland said to Timothy Bottoms in
that old movie *Johnny Got His Gun*,

—You're a very unlucky young man, and it rubs off.

They lie in bed together.

It seemed like the only way to bring any sense of comfort,

but it was damn uncomfortable all the same.

What's worse,

the wife had just pulled into the driveway.

The piece of shit van chugged listlessly to a dead, cold slumber,

as he rolled over,

trying to escape the smell.

—Did you fart?

He asked, but of course his friend couldn't answer.

There was a rattling of the lock and he got up.

She came in, carrying a bag of groceries in one arm.

She didn't, apparently, like the look of what she saw, as her face immediately fell into a little mui of dismay.

She tried to snuffle this,

closed the door,

rattled her keys.

He stood,

wishing he hadn't bothered taking off his pants.

The lump next to him rolled around in bed,

his eyes still distant and cold.

Blankly wet.

She plopped down into a chair,

setting her groceries down at her feet.

It seemed like a full minute before she began to speak.

—The strangest thing happened at the pharmacy. You know, they've built that new pharmacy. Place is huge, I think it has some sort of clinic attached to it. Anyway, I was in there to pick up some medication, and I see this woman enter. And, right away, I make that something is wrong. This woman enters, this skinny, scrubby blonde. And she's carrying twin baseball bats, one in each hand.

—And she runs past me, and starts to beat on the counter. And the skinny old fart pharmacist works there gets this horrified look on his face, reels back, and the female assistants are all stunned to speechlessness, but she just continues to run around and knock things over and bash things with those baseball bats... and then she runs in back, and I can hear screams. I think she bashed someone in the chops. Anyway, most folks just stood there stock still, not knowing what to do. Just thank God she didn't have a couple of guns, I guess.

—Anyway, it was only a few minutes before the cops showed up. They come running through the door with their guns drawn, and hop back behind the counter, and I can hear them shout for her to drop and put her hands up... and then there's silence. And then a few minutes later, they bring her out front in handcuffs...

He sits back on the edge of the rollaway bed,
says

—People are going crazy today.

—Lord have mercy yes. I don't know what's got into people.

She picks her groceries up,
looks distant and thoughtful,
and then comes back to present reality.
She trudges through the cluttered, filthy murk
into the kitchen.

He follows.

The floor is uneven, warped; puts you off your balance.
The kitchen is a filthy wreck of old beer bottles and Mc-
Donalds trash, peeling wallpaper,
overflowing ashtrays,
gnats swarming to and fro
...it has a weird, slightly sweet sickish odor,
like the smell of rotten fruit.

There is nothing appetizing here,
unless you're starving to death.

She's a large,
stocky woman with a huge ass.

Her hair is cut into little short, black clips that fringe
her large, too-plain face.

Her forearms are red and enormous.

She's missing her front teeth.

She has enormous breasts.

He feels the urge to take her rising inside him.

He's done it before; it's their little secret.

Her jeans are as tight as skin against her prodigious
rump.

She's putting cans of vegetables and fruit in the cup-
board.

—So I see the two of you got up to something while I was gone. Nice.

She didn't sound like she meant it.

He started to creep forward.

He put his hands out slowly,

cupped her breasts,

liking the soft, yielding nature of them through the cheap shirt.

She stiffened,

her head snapping up,

and turned.

Her face was one of the plainest, ugliest sights he had ever beheld,

yet he was still maddened by his own lust.

He wanted to cram his tongue down her toothless maw.

He could smell her strong exhale,

decided that it was both,

oddly,

revolting and intoxicating at the same time.

Her eyes were wide, black saucers.

She bent forward,

bent back,

decided to take the plunge,

and soon they were kissing madly at the counter.

He crept in silently,

his eyes adjusting to the gloom.

He looked a pathetic, sunken figure; scrawny and insignificant.

He watched them carefully.

His eyes taking it all in.

His mouth worked wordlessly around his calloused gums.

He emitted a croak.

She peeped him over the shoulder.

She pushed him back suddenly,

her eyes widening in terror.

She pictured her husband reaching for one of his guns.

Killing wasn't, necessarily, what was on his mind.

She stormed out of the kitchen,

crying,

running into the bathroom and slamming the door.

She was slamming things in there.

He didn't know what she was doing.

She was yelling something about rape.

As if.

As if he had HAD to rape her.

Ever.

His friend wandered through the litter on the floor,

his face cast down.

Hidden partly by hair,

partly by shadow,

all he could see was a white sliver of pale skin.

His friend seated himself on the bed,

leaned over, started to poke through the rack of cds.

A heavy thing brooded in the air.

In the bathroom,
he could hear sobbing,
the lid of the toilet slamming,
the sound of retching
...puke hit the toilet water with a sickening .
A cloud passed over the sun,
darkening the day.
Inside,
there was no light.

They had been waiting for the performance ever since the talent scout had accosted them at the mall.

The mall was a drooping,
smelly place that reeked of stale cigarette smoke,
cheap clothing stores,
bad confections,
and the dismal smell of spilt trash and dried soda on the old linoleum tiles.

It was a tired place,
a place as phony and insipid as the canned music pumped,
just below the level of consciousness,
to inspire shopping zombies to spend what little money they had on things they didn't really need.

But it was a social center.

One clique of kids,
with spiked hair and leather jackets adorned with patches,
studded bracelets,
pierced faces,
hanging out there with cigarettes jammed in the corners of their tight, apprehensive mouths.

They were the misfits and outcast punks of their high school,
pampered renegades.

They apparently had the sort of visual color the casting agent was looking for.

He approached them with a fistful of fliers,
and they eyed him apprehensively.

It probably didn't help that he had a cigar stuffed in the corner of his mouth,
a loud Hawaiian shirt,
and slicked-back hair.

—Hi ya, gang! Say, which one of youse wants to be in on a Hollywood production?

Before someone could tell him to

—get lost, pervert,

he started to hand out his little fliers,

which had a picture of a young person EXACTLY LIKE THEMSELVES on it,

and some large,

comic book blurbs that disappeared into a silly circus font

halfway down the page.

Hey, you! Do you think you have what it takes to be the next CELEBRITY STAR?

The kids milled around.

The lot of them were blocking the entrance.

They could see the security man hovering up the hall.

He looked as if he were circling warily,

ready to pounce.

—It ain't some porno thing is it?

The casting agent smiled.

He had tremendous, yellow horse teeth.

—Hey, kid, do I look like an idiot already? No, no way, man! This is completely legit! If it weren't, do you think

I'd be walking around handing out fliers to underage punks in a shopping mall?

—C'mon, use your head!

The casting agent smiled,

but beneath the friendly exterior,

one could see a hard, flinty, savage anger,

tethered just beyond reach of any bystanders,

kept on a short chain by the conscious part of his mind that said to him,

—Self, you have to keep certain aspects of your personality locked up tight, if you're to function in this world by all the rules. Otherwise, you let that particular jack out of his box... Bang! Someone gets hurt, and you suffer the consequences...

So he buried the monster within, so to speak.

He figured everyone did.

The girls,

who had plaid skirts and dirty white rock 'n' roll T-shirts,

and short, spiky hair

dyed different colors,

seemed to be getting some sort of general amusement at this bold come on

...maybe a few of them harbored some secret desire to be

—rich and famous

...maybe that's what every teenage girl secretly wanted; he didn't know.

So the kids took the fliers and made it to the auditions,
which were a perplexing series of strange exercises that
made little logical sense.

The casting agent was there,
along with the director and his assistant.

But,

anyone with any experience could tell it wasn't an or-
thodox production they were planning.

In fact, they could never seem to get quite certain whether
they were producing a play
or a film.

The director seemed to always be referring to
—stage left,

And

—stage right,

and his assistant would go on and on about camera an-
gles

...they often seemed confused between themselves.

—Okay, so we got you outside of a shopping mall, right? And you're sort of the new kid in town—

—Exactly what town is this, anyway?

—Louisville, Kentucky. I guess. I guess that's what the script says.

—Okay.

—Well, okay, kid, and anyway, you're straight as a stick—

—I'm straight edge—

—Yeah, yeah, and you have been for years. Anyway, you're inside this supermarket, see? And you're just kind of wandering the hallways in the middle of all these hill jacks, and maybe you're stuffing food in your pockets, because you're poor and hungry and alone. No food for awhile, right? And maybe the management suspects something, but the manager is a puny little guy, what's got no balls. So he just comes up to you, whispers in your ear, asks you to leave. Doesn't call the cops, y'unnerstand, because maybe he feels sorry for you. And the other customers are staring at you hard, and you're starting to cause a scene, and everything goes quiet. So you hustle out of there. Outside, you meet a couple of punks, a boy and girl pair, and you all instantly know you're gonna be friends.

—What's the point of all this, anyway?

—Just trying to fill you in on your motivation, son. Your motivation. Dig me?

So he goes outside,

and right away,
the man follows at his heels,
and he points out the hidden cameras,
although the boy thinks they must be hidden pretty good,
because there's not a trace of them anywhere.

There are two punk rockers from central casting standing in the entryway to the supermarket.

The boy is skinny,
has bad acne,
a studded leather jacket,
ripped up and patched jeans,
and a bright red Mohawk.

The girl is dressed like Nancy Spungen,
but has leopard spotted hair and freckles.
She's got a flat, plain face.

—Hey, buddy.

—Hey,
he says glumly.

He's not sure he likes this job anymore.

—Well, it's a tough slog, anyway.

—Huh?

The punk rock guy looks at him quizzically.

It's as if,
by breaking character,
he's confused the situation enormously.

He looks around for the director, but he seems to have disappeared.

*Shouldn't a movie production feature a crew? Sound guys?
Makeup? Something more?*

Curious shoppers mill around them,
coming and going through the sliding, automatic doors.
There is an awkward moment of silence
where the three of them stand,
stock still,

Staring at each other.

He suddenly says,

—I'm not from around here. By the way, where exactly
is here?

—Louisville. What, did you jump a train or something
to get here?

—Yeah, yeah, I jumped a train. I'm a real-live hobo. Just
like the old days.

—Shouldn't you have a stick, with a little kerchief tied
to the end of it? With all your worldly possessions in-
side?

The punk smiled.

Maybe he didn't brush his teeth so often.

His eyes were bloodshot and black-rimmed.

His girlfriend looked a little worse for wear.

—So you need a place to crash, right?

He stalled.

Did he really want to get involved with this lot?

What choice do I have?

—Yeah, I could use a place. I got nowhere else to go.

He paused.

—I got no money, man.

That didn't seem to matter to them.

They turned,

leading him across the street,

letting him walk slightly between them.

It was later, when they were smashing out car windows,
that he knew he had found his new identity.

It wasn't just the thrill of the orgies, either.

He found those to be incredible experiences,
but they paled in comparison to the casual violence that
now excited him,
every day.

The whole world disappeared into a quick succession of
short,
violent fits.

It was as if day and night were bleeding into each other,
becoming one huge, throbbing bruise.

So much blood spilled from the cut lips and busted noses
of themselves and their comrades
it's a wonder someone wasn't killed.

Of course, some of them died in other ways.

(One of them took an overdose. Turned blue on the basement floor. He had found legitimate work at a restaurant. Hadn't fixed in six months. He had gone to Dallas, lived on the streets, met a girl there. Junkie romance.

She was unattractive, tough to look at in the face. Low slung buttocks and tiny, wasp-like waist, frazzled blonde hair spilling out in limp curls, and crooked teeth. Hollow eyes, black ringed and sunken cheeks. Somehow unappetizing as hell.

He remembered sitting in a bar after last call, with a band that insisted on tired covers of old sixties standards, while better men yelled for Johnny Cash. She leaned over on the table, which was sodden with spilt beer, puddled with overflowing ashtrays and other refuse. She began to ball hard, and he wondered, turning to his fat friend who was keeping them.

—Don't ask, Ben.

His fat friend eyed him with huge, glittering cat eyes. He looked feline and ready to pounce. The drums hammered on the pathetic riser that served as a stage. The ugly little girl continued to ball.

Her boyfriend was a tall, lean kid with a bad smile. His lips peeled back from his teeth at the corners, and his skin was still youth blotchy and sporting acne. Drugs had brought both of them together.

He was 21 now. He leaned up against the bar, his arm resting in a puddle of spilt beer. He looked over at his girlfriend, not sure whether she had just passed out from

being drunk, or if this was something that, ideally, he should give his fleeting, ambled attention.

—Never mind, Ben!

—Yeah, but what's wrong with her, man?

He was as drunk as her, and somehow, his friend's steadily increasing tone of warning didn't penetrate through the various layers of his alcohol-induced haze.

—What did I say, Ben?

This time, there was a perceptible edge of violence in the tone. Ben threw up his hands as if to say, —Alright! Cool! I get the message.

The scene was punctuated by a stray drumbeat from the riser. A squeal of feedback. Tired, sluggish applause. The rapid rumble of conversation, and more tears.

—Last call!

The place they lived [or many of them lived] was a squat in an abandoned house. He could curl up in a corner of the garage, laid out on an old blanket and sleeping bag, freezing his balls off in the filth.

What was life? Bumming change, shoplifting, walking around all day wet and empty, shoes reeking, feet sore, clothes dirty, no longer caring about how you looked and smelled... and the alienation from THEIR world creeping over you, hour by hour, stripping you bare of the niceties and hardening you inside, searing your consciousness.

—I'm no longer one of them, it said, —So I no longer have to play by any of their rules. They don't apply to

ME.

[But the rules did apply. There were certain universal laws that couldn't be breeched, not by man or beast.]

The girl was headed back to Dallas, maybe. They couldn't make it work here; the only thing holding it together was drugs and desperation. Nothing stable. The boy got a part-time job as a cook. He could crash out in Joe's basement, sleep on an old couch down there. But sometimes he just stretched out on a blanket, with a candle and his few possessions surrounding him. It was a disquietingly religious tableaux.

He cooked for an upscale clientele that included local university professors. Some of them recognized him as the young son of a school psychologist. Well-to-do upbringing, everything he could want, whole future ahead of him. So why was he a junky cook?

But he was getting clean. He still drank, still beat the street with the same loser crowd, but he thought he had kicked...

But an opportunity must have presented itself.

That was it. Coiling like the proverbial serpent in the garden, tempting him, taunting him...

Ministry lyrics

Just one fix

Never trust a junkie

The cold, pathetic lies we tell ourselves to warm our bones.

He jerked awake that night in a deep sweat.

When they found him, he was already blue and stiff. His eyes held empty, vacant wonder.

—He looked like he'd seen hell, was all she would say. It was the girlfriend of the guy he was crashing with. She came downstairs, found him laid out, his meager possessions and some spare change surrounding the buggy old pink blanket he often slept on.

It was damn cold down there. His flesh was an ice sickle that would never thaw.

[You know how they get that cold, frozen-puppet look when they go? Skin loses all animation, like someone took the battery out? Rock hard and waxy sheen, never to move again, eyes blown out in the final, orgasmic contemplation of all that TIME... infinity. Eternity. What does it matter what one, insignificant man call it? Or, like a pebble cast up on a deserted beach, he meets his death, or her death, and disappear into the teeming multitude throngs of what has COME AND GONE BEFORE. And, tonight, we write the way the cavemen did. What is it to —communicate, anyway? —Nazi, Monkey, Séance tests the most subtle, sophisticated methods of communication for all they're worth, and rips them a new one. Or, at least the author pray it do.]

—God damn it, I'm a primitive. I'm fit only for the bush. For the jungle. Kill or be killed. Pick up that gun.

Gun?

He didn't even realize it was a gun.

It looked like a bloody prop.

Around them,

damn fool kids tooled around in the workshop.

Apparently,

these were the bright boys and girls tasked with keeping the world safe for democracy.

They all seemed oddly familiar; Null wondered if they were all ex-school shooters.

—Nonsense,

said The Major.

—Those kids always shoot themselves in the end, right? Before the cops get there? The SWAT team?

He sauntered around the room,

a lean,

mean killing machine in green

combat fatigues

and a beret.

Null thought he might have once been an actor in some old soap opera.

—If you see some sort of resemblance to someone you might have thought of as dead, it's purely coincidental.

No, in answer to the question you're itching to ask, we don't, officially, have a program to reanimate the dead.

No one saw any real percentage in it. Not cost-effective.

Null had no idea what he was talking about. Next—

—Now pick up that gun. C'mon, let's see how you are at servicing one of these babies!

Null picked it up.

It was an immensely long,
white barrel with a heavy metal stock.

Hard to grasp onto,
for some reason; not designed to reasonably accommodate the human hands.

He didn't know which way to aim it.

Suddenly,
before he knew it,
he was firing.

Screams.

Running for cover.

He remembered a time,
riding around with some fellows who had picked him
up.

This was in Texas,
somewhere.

They drove by two girls in poodle skirts.

One of them was with a boyfriend in a long, tattered
white shirt.

He looks like some sort of damn beatnik.

Why these people are all hanging around the train tracks,
I don't know.

—They're communists. We know them pretty well around
here. Always causing trouble. Fucking punks. The boy
is the ring leader. He sleeps with both the girls.

—Another Lee Harvey Oswald,
says the man in the passenger seat,
spitting into an old Coke can.

He must have been chewing tobacco.

—Shit, Oswald was innocent as a motherfucking baby,
man. Pigs done set him up. Must have been the CIA.
The man saying this is a large, handsome black man
with perfectly white teeth
and a gritty moustache.

He has huge arms,
is wearing a white, short-sleeved shirt,
and has a cynical expression.

—Anti-Castro Cubans,
says the driver,

looking back in the rearview mirror.

He has bad buck teeth,

huge plastic glasses,

and is wearing a dirty white shirt.

He has a wedding ring.

The sun glints off of it like a laser bolt for a moment,
almost blinding the driver.

—How the hell Oswald kill him with that cheap-ass rifle?
With a defective scope? Firing three marksman-style
shots from a bolt-action Mannlicher-Carcano,
through foliage,

at a moving target—

—Echoes. They heard echoes, is all.

The black man leans back in his seat, looks out the window,
looks bitter. —Yeah, just like James Earl Ray. Just
like Malcolm. Weird, huh?

The black man licked his lips, looked as if to say,

—Ain't weird at all, if you understand how The Man
works. That's all.

He leaned forward, pointed, said,

—Look!

The boy had a Molotov in his hand.

(What was it Abbie Hoffman wrote about the next time
you're in some out of the way place? In that *Steal This
Book* book?)

Suddenly, they knew bad shit was coming down,

and they were powerless to do anything to avoid it.

They were headed right for it,

as a matter of fact.

The boy lifts the thing.

They are all standing precariously scattered on the railroad tracks,

and they all thought that that was strange anyway.

But they didn't have time to ponder it.

One of the girls is running now,
flames whipping about her body,
trailing smoke.

Screams pierce the air.

The boy takes off running,
the girl follows her burning sister,
taking off her jacket,
reaching out to snuffle the flames.

—It's too late. She's dead, alright.

She would be a hideous thing.

Tucked away in some burn unit,
skin grafts and plastic surgery in her future,
bright memories of hope and dating long in her past.

Who would want such a freak now?

She looked like a carnival exhibit:

THE AMAZING FRIEDA, THE Fried cHicken woMAN

She was some sort of wannabe beatnik, had a stupid
boyfriend was into the stuff.

He had records of Kerouac

or some damn thing,

reading some poetry at a fag coffee house in the Bronx.

But she wore her little beret smartly,

and she hung out in all the most visible places.

Making a name for herself.

She was a repository of dim,

half-realized fantasies and childish reflections.

Lousy attempts at poetry and sculpture.

Right now

she was the last denizen of the bar

as the crowd shlugged away into the evening.

She was flipping through a stack of old comic books,

did so until an image arrested her consciousness.

There was a tall,

gangly individual in an astronaut's outfit.

She wasn't sure,

but she thought the story of the comic might take place

somewhere in ancient Egypt.

What were astronauts doing in ancient Egypt?

She didn't know.

(She didn't know a great many things.)

The woman sauntered up to her table,

slowly,

her eyes watery pits of knowing.

The beatnik girl looked up.

Lesbian?

She thought it probable the woman was going to give
her a perverse come on.

She was wearing a fetching black dress,

had short,

curly hair,

little granny glasses with rhinestones in the corner

...long black fingernails.

Heels,

black hose,

probably garters.

She was obviously on the prowl.

She flipped through the comic some more,

but she couldn't get that central image on the splash
page out of her mind.

The thing in the astronaut's uniform,

the grey,

withered thing with the huge eyes,

and the fetus-like cranium.

Wet,

clay-like skin,

a slit for a mouth;

obviously not a human being.

In ancient Egypt?

In an astronaut suit?

What did it mean?

—Hello there.

She looked up from the comic.

She felt a nervous tinge of apprehension at the vulpine stare of the woman.

She felt as if she were being sized up.

—Hi.

—My name's Rita. You come here often.

—No. Yes. I mean, I come here all the time. I mean?

—No need to explain. You looked like a lonely face. Like you spend your time here looking for friends, searching in every empty face for a sign of life, a spark of intelligence. You meet men, they lust after you... sometimes you take them home. But it's never really real, permanent, concrete. Right? Not what you're really looking for.

The beatnik girl twisted around in her seat,
nervously folded the corner of one of the comic books,
looked apprehensive,

but interested.

There was a moment when she felt like coyly opening up,

asking her if she was a dyke,
but something held her back.

A lazy trail of smoke snaked its way through the stifling air.

Flies dotted in puddles of spilt beer and died.

In the restroom, someone was busy being sick.

—My name's Rita.

She held out a hand.

She had the funniest little ring.

On her pinky.

And bright black nails.

The beatnik girl took her hand.

It was bony and ice cold.

It was like holding a bundle of old sticks.

Or a dead bird.

And she could smell the wafting scent of her perfume,
the cloying, funereal reek forming an interesting counterpoint to the dank fumes of beer
and burnt pizza cheese.

It smelled like a rotting funeral wreath.

The beatnik girl looked a little embarrassed.

—You already told me your name, though. REETA.

—Yes. And I don't come here often. Only at intervals.

—Intervals?

—Sure. I travel a lot. I have a million stories to tell.
Been all over this world, going to and fro in it, walking
up and down on it?

The beatnik girl felt her cheeks flush, suddenly.

It was stifling hot in here,

and she badly wanted to get up,

go outside,

fill her lungs with fresh air.

The place was a carcinogenic nightmare of stale cigarette
smoke and spilt beer fumes.

But she couldn't move.

It was something in the icy,
black eyes that seemed to disappear down,
down into the fetid well of the human soul.
Eyes of chipped obsidian; eyes like glittering dark jew-
eled stars
in some unrighteous firmament
where truth was held upside down
on the fishhook of lust and barbarity.
She felt the cold tendrils of fear begin to grip her belly,
along with a strange, animal-like arousal.
She squirmed in her chair.
Rita leaned over,

far,

her hot exhale blowing in her face.
Suddenly,
the beatnik girl felt the world narrow down to a pinpoint
of concentration.
It seemed as if the thick,
black shifting shadow of the bar had suddenly bright-
ened
into an electric blue field of energy.
She focused on the eyes,
the lips; they moved,
yet,
the sound seemed to be drowned out in some subtle
drone that was both unnerving
and intoxicating in equal measure.

—I've always been here. I can't remember a time when I wasn't here. Do you understand me? *Do you understand me now?*

She tried to speak,
felt her words clutch in her throat.
Somewhere,
there was music coming from the jukebox,
but it was now a tiny,
insignificant vibration in a din of whirling sound that
was Rita's strange, whispery,
metallic voice.

—Once, when I was at a party, some guys took me for a ride in their car. This was in the year of the flu epidemic, when everybody died. Even the tourists. Never mind about that. I was drunk. One of the men had a gun. I think they were both gangsters, or card cheats. One of them was named George. I remember that much.

—We parked the jalopy in an old field, so we could look up at the stars. So many stars in the sky back then. Have you noticed that the stars are disappearing, one by one, winking out, so that, now, for some strange reason, you don't see so many of them? I wonder why it is they do that. Anyway, George gets out, and he is drunker than a skunk, and I get out and mosey through the tall grasses, and the other fellow, the little fellow, gets out and he is not so drunk, but he is bulldog mean. I knew he was, because I saw him beat a man he thought had cheated him out of some money, And that was in the Year of

Our Lord, 1915.

—And George is waving that gun around like he's shooting at invisible Indians, and the little mean fellow is starting to get more and more nervous, but it don't bother me none at all, and so I sort of feel this intuition to go up to the little man and whisper something naughty in his ear. Playful-like. I don't know why.

—So I go up to him, and I tell him that George is planning on popping him with that pistol, and taking me to Mexico, and fucking me while laughing over his old, dead corpse, and that that was the plan to get us all out here.

The beatnik girl imagined the both of them standing
naked

in that electrifying field of solid blue.

She imagined Rita's mouth moving,

like a blossoming orchid,

over her own pale,

pink lips,

imagined the tongue penetrating the teeth as it flowed
like a fleshy snake into her own.

These things seemed to happen with a slow-motion resonance,

like a scene in an old, forgotten film.

She began to ache,

longingly.

—And so the little man looks shocked, but says noth-

ing. And he—

Null went into his apartment,
went to the counter,
searched through his pill bottles.
Couldn't find what he was looking for.
Why were things always disappearing?
He felt he knew.
—This place is accursed.
He murmured it aloud.
Wasn't that what was written at Renne Le Châteaux?
Over the Holy of Holies?
Null hadn't wanted this particular apartment.
Worse,
he knew the old lady had died here,
and somehow,
she wasn't entirely convinced that it was time to leave.
Objects kept moving around of their own accord,
appearing and disappearing,
and there were those cries and groans in the night.
Where did they originate from?
He wasn't sure.
What's more,
he could feel the palpable presence of evil,
of ever-present fear and tension,
like a heavy,
vice-like grip on his heart.
As soon as he stepped foot back in the place
at the end of the day,
all his happy feelings sank into his stomach.

The very walls seemed to sweat fear and loathing.
He became anesthetized to it,
after a fashion,
but the more detached he became,
trying emotionally to avoid the reality of the spirit possession of his apartment,
the worse the manifestations became.
The TV set sometimes spoke to him.
Others might call him mad.

And there was the thing with the faucets.
How they turned themselves on with invisible hands.
He discussed this with his mother,
who lived downstairs, and who was often in bed from illness.

—She's just testing you, is all. In time, she'll realize what she is, and she'll leave.

—You said that about the phantom caller. Guy called claiming to be me.

—He sounded like you.

—Yes, but I was in the room with you. Anyway, he said he was the Devil, too. Remember? Then we figured out it was a man that had only recently died. But how the hell we were getting calls from him, I'll never know.

—You've always been such a baby about these things. You need to learn to grow up.

She smoked a cigarette.

—You shouldn't smoke in bed. There's liable to be a fire

someday. If you fall asleep.

—Sleep? I don't sleep. In Hell, there is no sleep...

—Reminds me of that dream you told me about long ago.

She looked quizzical.

—What dream?

—Don't you remember? You were so moved by it, you had to wake up and tell me right away. You were at some chichi dinner party. It was the middle of the night. The host came out, wearing a mask. You suddenly realized it was a costume party. They brought out the main course, which was a food that looked like turkey stuffing. And this food was special. They said it gave you visions, took you to a strange place. They said you could see off into other dimensions, see beings that exist just beyond the veil of tears, the veil of the fleshly world.

—You're so poetic, and melodramatic. But continue.

—Anyway, you and the other guests ate this food.

—You said your eyes rolled up in your head, and that you suddenly saw a whirlpool of colors, like a kaleidoscope of shifting images, and your head filled with a cacophonous music, the likes of which you'd never heard. It was mad, idiot piping, strummed harps, choirs singling, electric guitars, massive kettle drums, and entire debauched symphony from another planet... all wrong, yet, somehow, all right...

—Christ. Didn't you open to Psalm 30 and read it, that same night? Something about being dragged down into

the pit?

He stopped, licked his lips, considered. Perhaps he had. He couldn't, now, remember.

—anyway, you said it developed into a real freak scene. People running around, hallucinating things that weren't there. Fucking and shitting in the hallways of this old mansion. Going crazy.

—Did I say such things? Hardly seems Christian of me. He stopped, licked his lips again. He felt like it was suddenly too damn hot in that room. He looked down at his skinny little mother as she lie in bed; she could have been the reanimated dead.

—Maybe it really happened. Maybe it was the night I was conceived, huh? Is that the deep, dark secret of my life?

She smiled at him, a large, vulpine smile that looked as if it could swallow planets.

—Maybe, she said, huffing heavily in the darkness. Reaching over for her water, struggling with the bottle of pills. Struggling to get the lid off of the pill bottle. Took the pills.

—You take too many of those, Mom, one day you won't wake up.

—Sure. Maybe I'll finally figure out what this crazy dream is all about, after all, huh?

He remembered driving with her one winter day, her beating on the steering wheel, exclaiming that she — Couldn't handle life! He thought that that was a cop-

out.

—Anyway, you told me that, in the dream, there was a monster chasing you...

—A monster? What sort of monster?

—A monster, a demon or something. You said the food helped you see into those other worlds.

—Some food could, I suppose.

—You said that you saw things, running through those halls, that you couldn't believe. Old murders reenacted, bloodstains in the carpet pooling fresh, and bodies emerging from them. The restless dead walking about... Stuff like that.

—You said you saw men crying like children, on their knees, clutching at invible bugs, invisible spiders, things you knew weren't there.

—I remember a book called *Hostage to the Devil* by Malachi Martin. A woman in that book was supposed to be a schizophrenic. She sat all day on a park bench or something, staring off into space. She had a meeting with a strange man. He raped her, I think. Anyway, I remember this line where she intoned something like, —Last night I was fucked by a giant glowing spider! Can you believe that? She was possessed by spirits.

—I think I am too. I think we all are. It's why these bodies continue to move and breathe and think.

—Not the most delicate way to put it, but I suppose I can see your point.

—Anyway, you said the dream ended when you followed

a strange figure in a flowing white robe into a doorway. You said you thought the figure was an angel. It turned out to be a lavatory.

—The Angel of the Pissour. How utterly droll.

—You said you followed the figure into a stall, butt that it disappeared into thin air. Then You could hear something in the stall next to you. Suddenly, you said, a hideous, demonic face sprang up over the top of the stall... and you woke up screaming.

—Screaming from the dream chamber. Remarkable.

He looked at her in silent disappointment. She could always be counted on to ruin whatever strange reverie he was trying to conjure.

He avoided going upstairs till the last possible moment,
but eventually, the lure of sleep was too much.

He climbed

Apprehensively

onto the elevator,

stood in the sweaty funk,

smelling somebody's used diapers

reeking in the trash bin next door.

Shitty old folks smell.

Depends.

Tiny Tim wore 'em,

he thought with a rueful smile.

He unlocked the door,

right politics.

He turned away

feeling the icy chill hit him

as he circumnavigated the darkness,

popping on every light.

It was too quiet here,

too still; the calm before the storm.

He was now waiting.

He took his medication.

Arthritis was bloody killing him.

He needed the medication tonight.

His body was aching miserably.

He went to the counter,

turned on the tap.

There was a pile of dirty dishes sitting in the sink.

There were gnats flying around bothersome,
but he ignored them.

Let them peck out their little gnat lives of repressed
insect-like hostility. Like Jeff Goldblum said,

—Insects don't have any politics
back to the counter, making sure to shut off the faucet.
He rearranged a few things.

Suddenly, he heard the rush of water again,
from the faucet.

He froze in terror.

—It's just a problem with the plumbing, is all. Nothing
to write home about.

He turned just the same,
saw the handle on the faucet rise,
depress,
rise.

It was moving by itself.
He thought he could hear low,
sinister laughter,
like rusty purring,
somewhere.

Suddenly, there were voices in the hall.

—Open up in there! Hey.
No peace for me he thought madly,
his heart hammering in his chest.
No peace at all.

He crept to the door slowly,
looked out the peephole.

Someone obviously had their hand covering it.

Or maybe it was defective, or something?

He couldn't remember the last time he used it.

His heart still hammering in his chest,

he reached out with quivering fingers and took the long,
straight handle of the door.

There were two figures standing in the hallway,
facing his door.

A female policeman of a very masculine countenance,
and a large black girl who was completely naked.

She had tremendous,

pendulous breasts,

huge hips,

long legs,

a massive ass.

She was at least three inches taller than the policewoman,
who was taller than Null.

At the opening of the door,

the black girl seemed to panic,

thrusting her hands forward across her breasts and wom-
anhood,

as if trying to hide herself.

There was a moment of dead silence,

a sort of click of the clock

where nothing occurred;

a moment frozen in time.

Suddenly,

as if to fill the gap,

the policewoman pulled the immense black girl forward
by the arm, intoned

—Does this belong to you.

He continued to stare.

There was more silence.

—We found her wandering around in the parking lot.

More silence.

Cold stares.

A wax museum moment of mounting tension,
followed by his slow resolve.

He quietly shut the door.

Slowly.

Stood facing it a moment.

He realized the unlikely circumstances of what had just
happened ever occurring.

He heard something rustle and moan in the bedroom.

He felt the next few moments dissolve into a strange,
sommnambulistic void.

His vision was split between the cracked doorway of the
bedroom,

and the floor of the, essentially, bare living room.

There was someone lying in his bed.

He could see, quite plainly, who it was.

Monstrous, was all he could think. Utterly monstrous.

Perhaps that was why he was haunted.

A man possessed.

He could hear all sound disappear into a black,
roaring drone.

He felt as if he were standing in a tunnel.
He felt as if he were standing outside of himself,
looking at himself,
as if he were riding in a little cart at the back of his head.
Someone else was driving the train, he knew.
He went into the living room,
ignoring the strange creature lying in his bed,
and had a vision of that creature sitting up,
shrouded,
covered in filmy white cloth, sucking it down her
(it was undoubtedly a her)
throat.
Reanimated like a vampire from some silent film.
He fancied he could hear screams,
somewhere.
Very faint,
but audible, nonetheless.
He lay down on the floor, closed his eyes.
He got up, turned, looked down.
He was still down there lying on the floor.
A dream of death?
Death is like a dream?
Out of the body.
He could see someone at the corner of his vision, leading him.
—Someone I'm not supposed to look at directly,
he said.
—Yes,

said a voice to his side,
—you're not supposed to look at me directly.
The figure lead him into the bedroom.
He fought to keep his vision centered on what was pointed
to be a long, quivering, gloved finger
at
the end of a black-shirted arm.

The mirror on the wall was filmy with smoke,
as if it were reflecting a tunnel of clouds.

—Go ahead,
said the voice at his side,
which was high and artificial
and electronic and child-like
and like the tinkling of bells and some sort of rare wine
(poured into a crystal goblet)

—What do you see?

(Long ago the author experienced a similar vision, wherein
he lay down one morning after striking a Bible with his
fist, and was treated to a sudden vision of a burning
world that might have been earth in the ancient mists of
pre-history, or might have been some alien world. Later,
he thought it must have been Earth.)

They were sitting in the pizza restaurant. The entire family,
dining out in quaint,
conservative American style.
It could have been any American city of a middling size.
That's not important.
Junior took a drink of cola,
wiped his mouth on his shirt.
The grandmother gummed her pizza.
The grandfather leaned back,
already having eaten a great deal.
A cousin glumly munched a breadstick.
Maybe she was concerned that she had put on so much weight.

There was an entire nuclear family,
all seated at one table,
in an otherwise empty pizza restaurant.
The family ate.
The cars whisked by in the settling gloom.
The restaurant was bare except for one man and his child.
They had a pizza in front of them,
on the table.
The little boy might have been eight years old.
His eyes were unhappy little moons of want,
ringed about with dark circles
A cloud overtook the sky
Everything settled down

to a blanket of shadows
The boy picked up a piece of pizza,
half-heartedly,
and chewed
The other family continued their enjoyment of the day
A peculiar chill crept into the air,
a sort of sulfur whiff
Penetrated the still dank fetor of pizza cheese and old
tomato sauce
The smell was not delicious.
One of the boys at the opposite table turned his head,
casually
glancing over at the sullen man and child.
His food fell out of his mouth and into his lap.

Decapitation ritual

It was a comic-grotesque moment,
a frozen moment of slow-motion in which everyone
seated at the table opposite of the event
fought to adjust themselves to the reality of what they
had just seen.

Eyes bulged,
mouths fell open spilling food,
and there was a delayed scream and shouts.
the bored young man behind the counter looked sud-
denly nervous,
put his hands in front of him,
exposing dirty,
cracked knuckles.

Should he intervene?

It seemed as if he thought it would almost be rude.
The man at the table opposite produced a buck knife.
He leapt from his seat,
slid in next to his, presumable son, and looked down at
him.

The boy looked up with vacant,
dark eyes that said,

—We've been through this ritual before, haven't we?
The man ran his filthy fingers through the boy's scalp.
Clumps of hair came off in his fingers.

The boy.

The boy smiled.

The boy smiled wide.

The boy's smile dripped raspberry-colored trickles of blood.

The father cut the boy's head off.

Pulled it

with a sucking plop

from the scrawny neck,

held it up like a trophy,

cast it through the plate glass window of the booth,

jumped out and ran down the street,

screaming...

The little body jerked convulsively.

A mystery to modern medical science;

It sprayed blood like a geyser.

The family at the opposite table pushed themselves away from their pizza.

They looked at each other with curious expressions.

Shouldn't they be sick about this?

They seemed uncertain.

Later,

the cops would come in and sniff around,

The cold little body outlined in chalk where it fell in

In the pizza booth

Neck stump leaking out the busted window.

—Did you find that man? Did you find him? What if

the sonofabitch does it to somebody else?

Grandpa wandered around in minimal,
shocked outrage,

pointing a quivering grey finger.

The rest of the family went outside,
noting the ominous calm of the day,
which was darkling grey now.

Alarms and sirens could not even be heard; something
seemed to be swallowing up the sounds of a city that had
stopped,
instantly.

The family members examined their clothing,
their arms; they seemed to be covered in a fine mist of
blood?

How?

They were sure they hadn't gotten any on them.

Was blood blowing in the wind like an old, tattered
banner of yesteryear?

He brooded in silence
Out there he could hear them gathered
The bastard had forced his way in and now there were
dozens of them
And what were they doing in there with that girl?
He didn't want to know. It was like some macabre fantasy of a ritual performed
By secret witches at a coven
somewhere,
Hidden underground
from the prying eyes of law enforcement.
The smell was noxious, terrible;
none of those motherfuckers ever bathed, apparently.
Filthy vagrants,
drawing flies.
Who cared if his home was a rundown haven of roaches and mice?
It was still HIS home.
He got up slowly.
This had been his grandparents' bedroom once.
He had restored it to the best of his ability.
The walk-in closet where grandpa slept still had his bed,
his personal possessions:
a few rusted tin cans,
coffee cup,
old,
musty clothing hanging on nails...
He walked down the short hall,

noting the creaking floorboards,
the increasing din as he approached the cheap door.
He put his palms flat against the old wood,
put his ear against the door
He leaned forward.
He could hear the steady thump of drums,
the rattle of ice in empty glasses,
the clinking of bottles.
He could hear weeping.
Suddenly, he pushed.
She was standing, streaked with tears, in the center of a
ring of smelly perverts.
Most of them looked as if they might have just rolled in
from the local homeless shelter:
long black coats,
filthy pants,
dirty fingers clutching old bottles of hooch.
Long, stringy hair tied up in bandannas,
stuffed under stocking caps.
Cracked lips wet by parchment-like tongues,
bloodshot, bleary eyes straining in the gloom.
Her face was bone white from pancake makeup.
Red lipstick curved down from the corners of her mouth,
and her eyes were raccoon streaks of runny mascara.
Her hair was a yellow,
straight mop of sweat and grease.
She was sitting hunched over,

as if ready to crawl between the legs of the beasts ogling her.

She looked over at him as he bounded thorough the door.

Her eyes told the story of her life.

All action seemed to dwindle down to a few shuffling movements, some disappointed mutterings, and a fart or two.

She got up slowly,
her bra hanging halfway off of one arm,
and ran past him out the door.

He wasn't sure,
for a moment,
if any of this had even been real.

Later,

he went into the kitchen,
retrieved a bone-handled blade from the rickety old drawer
with the chipped paint.

His hand was shaking somewhat.

He was alone.

He picked up the blade.

The ticking of the clock was loud,
ominous in the stillness of the night.

He could almost believe he had traveled backward in
time right now.

Every footfall seemed to fall in a pool of weltering red
shadow.

Was he walking in a pathway of blood?

The house seemed to take on added dimensions,
becoming hideous and strong in the twists of shadow,
expanding outward until it took on a gigantic architec-
ture that was occult in its proportions.

He saw that the bedroom door was standing ajar.

The skinny little man lolled in bed.

He was apparently having some sort of macabre dream.

Something was unduly troubling him in his nightly sou-
journs.

He tossed and turned.

He crept forward,

a loose board creaking beneath his toes.

He could hear the high squeal of it pierce the silence,

threatening to awaken the sleeper that lay before him
in a sweaty tumble of dirty sheets.
The skinny, hairy chest was thrust out from beneath the
blankets,
arms folded back,
loosely,
above the head,
head a matted mess of drippy, sleepy hair and pulled
taught unconsciousness face.
—That face. My God.
—It's my face.
—The figure turns over in bed,
wipes his palm across his brow.
—But it is unmistakably the figure of myself.
He stretched out his arms akimbo,
striking the perfect pose.
Beads of sweat rolled down his cheeks
and into his sleeping eyes.
The eyelashes fluttered.
He thought
Perhaps
a fly might light upon one of them,
lay some eggs,
and be off again,
circumnavigating the dust motes in the stale,
lifeless air of the bedroom.
He crept in closer,
hefted the knife upward,

mentally prepared himself for the assault.

He would cut the throat,

like the maniac in Poe's story.

—It must have been the eye of the terrible old man,
he reminded himself.

But he couldn't see the eyes.

They were hidden under thin membranes of sleeping,
rumpled skin.

He could eat this character alive,

punish him for what he had enacted this evening.

In his mind's eye,

he could still see the shock-trauma figure of the weeping
girl,

sitting on her ass in the crowded bedroom,

her mascara-streaked face running with hot tears,

her lipstick smudged.

He could bury him under the floorboards; this house ate
time and evidence like a hungry lion.

He would bury his tell-tale heart.

To keep it ticking.

Like the hammering thud of an old clock.

They would tip-toe around him unawares,

the strange ones who came and went,

the family members with their mocking,

sincere,

worried faces,

the social workers who dipped their delicate toes in the
accursed block of ruined,

brittle houses that lined the decrepit street.
But no drop of blood,
not a spot of DNA,
and only the moldering stink
to remind anyone that he had ever lived at all.
Because this house ate death. And time.

—We keep them on their toes. See?

The Major pointed out the window at a straggling band of refugees,

men and women in filthy clothing gone to rags,

carrying sticks and makeshift weapons

as they marched in a crouched column,

as if they were guerilla soldiers on patrol

This was the center of an old highway,

where rusted hulks of abandoned cars had been reclaimed by nature,

as nests for birds and other wild animals.

—I thought about stopping for some of them. Might be interesting to know the psychological impact of all of this. Believe me, though: it's necessary. The population explosion, the ever-dwindling resources... the people in control know what they're doing.

—So you fake some sort of major catastrophe? Apocalypse?

He smiled.

He had a big, square-jaw smile that was full of all-American confidence, and clean teeth.

—We've created a scenario whereby the nuclear annihilation of ALL life on this miserable ball of rock might be, potentially, averted. Pretty significant accomplishment, wouldn't you agree? I mean, it isn't as if most of these useless eaters will ever be missed. And we're getting so much in return.

—You sound like you've made a deal with the Devil.

He considered for a moment,
drew a lopsided grin,
looked at Null out of the corner of his eye.
—Perhaps we have. Perhaps we have, indeed.
The voice of the Major seemed to take on a droning,
hypnotic quality.
In front of them,
the highway swept on into an infinity of amber corn-
fields dying in the oppressive sunlight.
Null suddenly felt as if the view in front of him were
morphing into a giant skull.
—Take you for instance. You're under the impression
that you're here, right now. Correct?
Null nodded slowly. He felt bile roiling around in the
pit of his stomach. Something was desperately wrong.
—But I say unto you: all of reality is nothing more
than an illusion foisted upon the unwary by a cryptic,
inscrutable Overmind. But the truly elect KNOW and
SEE, and seeing, can manipulate reality for their own
purposes.
His words exploded like fireworks behind Null's eyes.
He leaned back in the seat,
feeling the car accelerate upward as if they were about
to leave the hot tarmac and go sailing,
like the most mysterious UFO,
into the wild blue yonder.
He clutched his knees.
His mind went to a disturbing dream of the other night.

He was living with the grandfather in the old house,
in the old neighborhood,
and it was a dark day.

The old man was forever puttering about in another
room,

doing God knows what.

The old man apparently fancied himself a young man,
as he was dressed in the fashion of a man twenty years
younger,

with a red bandanna around his forehead.

Null had heard all about the child abductions.

Apparently,

some wraith-like individual had swept through the neighborhood,

taking children at play one by one.

These were never seen again.

—Some people say he's Iranian.

—Iranians are all crazy.

—That's just Zionist propaganda.

—Like hell. Try living in fucking Tehran.

—When the hell were YOU ever in Tehran?

He didn't answer,

but continued to stare with his nose pressed against the
screen door.

It wasn't long after,

on a day that was drizzling grey and wet with slop,
that he was standing in the exact spot where he always
stood,

looking out at the grey strip of street as cars swept by in the cold.

Suddenly,

a large vehicle pulled up to the curb.

A man got out wearing a ski mask.

He was dressed in what looked like a purple jump suit of some sort.

He was carrying a large knife.

—It's too obvious to be the child snatcher. But, that man is insane, at any rate.

He froze at the screen door,

too much lost in contemplation to make any sudden movements toward self-preservation.

He knew that,

by all rights,

he should really shut the heavy front door and go, and call the police.

The masked man, it seemed, was standing in his yard.

For some reason though,

he couldn't move.

The figure stood out at the edge of the sidewalk, his head slightly bowed.

He seemed to be presenting himself like an actor performing a role.

—That's not quite right,

though,

because he's obviously no actor.

He was quite tall.

He was powerful-looking.

He looked like he was here on official business.

He suddenly moved forward,

as if someone had tripped an invisible control,

and started to examine their rusted,

Piece-of-shit car as it sat on cinder blocks in the driveway.

—What's he looking for?

The masked man still had his knife in his hand.

His hands were large,

as powerful as the rest of him.

Null wondered if he had ever killed with those hands.

—Of course he has. What, do you think he has some hidden fairy-tale castle where he's keeping all of the abducted children prisoners? You, idiot; he butchers them and dumps their bodies in shallow graves in the woods.

Right now,

he wanted grandpa to come out of his hole and get a gander of this.

It was, he noted, important stuff.

Not every day some major American criminal landed, big as life, in your front yard,

to examine your shitty car.

He looked down.

Perched at the bottom of the screen door was the largest black dog he had ever seen.

Bristling fur,
huge jaws; the thing looked like it ate babies for dinner.
He greatly hated and feared dogs,
maybe more than he feared the Child Snatcher,
who,
after all,
had so far not proven to be a menace to other adults.
He was now completely frozen with terror,
although the animal,
so far,
hadn't done anything threatening.

—Grandpa!

He started to yell,
his voice coming out trembling before rising to a higher,
harsher tone that bespoke his fear and frustration.
(He was almost, it seemed, shocked at the sound of his
own voice.)

—Get your ass out here, old man!

He knew that that was rude and mean,
but he couldn't help himself.
He had to bring the old bag of bones running.
And, in a few moments, Grandpa did emerge,
his face a blank, prosaic mask of curiosity,
the red bandanna wound tightly over a few locks of hair
that had obviously been dyed black.

Grandpa came to the screen door,
his face a mask of confusion.

Outside, the masked figure was still looking in the passenger side seat of the car.

Later, they made their way to a sort of back porch,
each sitting in sullen contemplation of everything they
had seen since coming to the camp.

Night was a silent carnival

of cricket chirps

and perfumed breezes,
heavy and redolent with the thick musk of blossoming
flowers.

The porch overlooked a deep hedge.

—There's something in there. Can't you hear that rustling?

—Some sort of animal perhaps.

—I'm not sure.

The bushes began to shake.

Suddenly, a small, shadowy figure burst out of the hedge.

The both of them were speechless,

but they suddenly sat up in wonder.

It was a diminutive, dwarf-like little being,

wearing what appeared,

at first,

to be a huge, conical hat.

It looked like some sort of ceremonial garb.

Perhaps it was like the Pope's mitre?

—It looks ritualistic, or tribal.

Indeed, they both turned to each other,

realizing that the hat the little figure wore was,

in point of fact,

shaped like a giant green penis.

—He seems to be some preternatural being.

The figure twirled and danced in the dirt,

kicking up dust.

Just as quickly,

he seemed to vanish.

They turned to each other in surprise.

Suddenly,

they heard the gravely sound of someone clearing their throat behind them.

It stood in the doorway,

bathed in the light from the next room.

It was like a giant toad-thing,

monstrously ugly,

but somehow pathetic and endearing in its ugliness.

It raised a frog-paw,

ugly, curled nails grown out like the nails of some jungle cat.

The eyes were red toad eyes.

It gurgled something unintelligible.

It seemed to need help.

Or maybe this was its way of offering a greeting...

...And then it was time to STOP.

Silence reigned over the camp.

Pools of shadow covered silent reveries of the spirit.

Brooding time curled like a python around the throat of a naked lover, desire tipped

on the point of a spear
called
Dream and reality...

This place is accursed.
This piece is finished.

Or:

Why I want to FUCK Adam Lanza

Null rolled over in bed.
Iron Maiden sang "Aces High" on television.
He was wrestling with a corrugated plastic hose.
Someone was in bed with him.

Female.

Maybe this was a memory of past conquests.
He grabbed the thing as it snaked past his arm,
twirling it in the air.

It didn't seem to have a head...

maybe he wouldn't get bitten if he could just hold onto
the neck.

How could it be alive?

—Another enigma.

—I'll tell you an enigma in a riddle. How was it that
Lincoln dreamed of his assassination before it actually
happened?

She considered.

—How the hell should I know? Do I look like I have all
the answers?

She did, indeed, have very large, fat breasts,
though all the answers she clearly DID NOT have.

He sat up,

casting the horrid plastic snake to the floor where, presumably, it died.

—I'll tell you, last night: I was Lincoln.

—No shit? Who knew Honest Abe had such a little dick—

—Oh, you—

—He's such a tall guy, too—

She started to laugh, scratched under her armpit.

His voice narrowed to a whisper.

—I'm being serious. It's like I'm being groomed for something.

—You're so melodramatic.

He leaned back on the pillow,
casting his eyes up at the ceiling.

A thin crack in the plaster ran like a crooked smile
across the pocked, white surface.

—I found myself walking down a flight of stairs.

—In the White House, right.

—Right. And do you know what? I'm frequently there in my dreams. Once, I started out in the foyer of a college dining hall, and ended up going through a hidden door, up a spiraling staircase, and there was a shelf of old books like in a thrift shop. So I leaned over and grabbed one. It was about JFK. Something told me that, in the pages of THIS book, as opposed to all the oth-

ers, the true identity of the Kennedy conspirators was revealed. But nobody realized it.

—You have Lee Harvey Oswald on the brain.

Null turned to the television.

Iron Maiden had given way to an old movie set in the arctic.

A group of scientists in Antarctica were facing off against an extraterrestrial menace

that burrowed beneath the snow.

The movie was literally called

—The Arctic Worm.

—I've NEVER heard of this before. But it looks really old.

The scientists were apparently enacting a last-ditch effort to avoid being killed by the hideous Arctic worm.

They were attempting to lure it into the mouth of some underground cavern.

Here perhaps they would capture,

bring it back to the States to put on display,
like King Kong.

Or maybe,

since they had sticks of dynamite...

He had woken up with the image of Melissa Ann haunting his mind.

She had been such a wonderful creature,

with long legs,

and a perfect little slip of a figure,

and short red hair,

parted in the middle.

—But isn't she dead?

He rolled over and looked at her strangely.

He wasn't sure she wasn't simply mocking him.

He did, sometimes, forget the particulars of certain aspects of life.

—Isn't it strange how we're always going to hold an image of someone we loved in our minds

as they looked when they were young and spry?

As if time cannot touch them?

—Just like your friend that was murdered.

—Yeah, Sort of like that. I'll forever see him the way I knew him when we first met, all those years ago.

—What was it that happened exactly?

—That again?

—I like to hear you tell the story

—I'm not sure I can talk about it right now,

he rolled around in bed, looked at the television.

It seemed to mock the heaviness in the air

in its own inimitable fashion

He turned back around.

She was sitting up at his shoulder, one eyebrow arched.

Maybe she didn't realize going over this was difficult for him, that it was all too strange, still boiling, after over twenty years, in the hot fires of his subconscious

—I guess I had a gay crush for him or something.

—You wanted to jerk him off?

He paused.

—I jerked off in front of him. I'm still not sure why. It got me off. We were lying in bed in the old room. All the rest of the kids were watching movies in the day room. But we were alone in the dark, in our little bunks, and he starts telling me this shit about how he wants to fuck this younger boy. How he wants to put his dick in his mouth, and I get so turned on I pop a boner. And we talk about sex the way young boys will, except, technically, he's eighteen, so not such a little boy...

—Fucking pervert. Go ahead.

Null considered.

—And that's pretty much it. I whipped it out and started rubbing one out with the lights out. And he's over there watching me in the dark. And he's probably about ready to cum. And I make like I'm not even doing it for his benefit, like it's all about ME. Which I guess it was.

She propped herself up on one arm. Was he going to have to confess this same shtick, over and over again, for her benefit?

—So?

Null says,

—So what? I told you, nothing else ever happened. It wasn't even weird between us, after that. It was just forgotten. He fell in love with some skank hussy and got in trouble for it. No —special relationships allowed in that place.

—That place is gone, correct?

—Yeah. I'm sure the building is still there. And haunted.

—By his ghost?

—By all sorts of ghosts. Empty echoes of the past, old snatches of song. Time melts, fades into memory and darkness. Some survive, some die. Eventually, all the shadows fade into darkness. It all dies, and gets shoveled under. Dust and bones—

—Is a Guns N' Roses song, Mr. Melodramatic.

—He didn't survive. Frank made sure of that.

She paused.

Outside,

the wind seemed to blow into a low, steady moan. he imagines them getting buried under a frosty white blanket. In some forgotten corner of a weed-choked lot, an old tombstone is getting similarly buried.

—He moved up north. Met some girl. Maybe they were in love. No matter. They shared the same fate, at any rate. You have to wonder how God decides these things. Are two people fated to meet, just so they can meet such a tragic end, together? Are we born damned?

—Maybe it's all some sort of cosmic accident, or joke.

—Maybe God has a wicked sense of black humor, and just moves us all around for his amusement. But that doesn't feel right, does it?

She was silent for a moment.

—No. I think that, with God, all bets are off.

—We can't even begin to comprehend Him on a human level, right? Our minds might as well be the minds of monkeys compared to His. Am I right?

She frowned, settled herself again on the pillow. Outside, the gust picked up into a howl as snow pelted the glass.

—I'm so glad we're inside. In here is life. Out there is death. Did I tell you about the dream I had about Mikey's death.

She turned back around. He could suddenly smell the heavy coffee aroma of her sweaty funk.

—Who's Mikey?

—Mikey... was this brain damaged little dweeb I went to high school with. He was another misfit in the Special Ed classes. He smelled like a dog's ass, and he came to school wearing clothes pulled straight from the Salvation Army dumpster. Everyone knew he lived in a filthy, rundown house in the ghetto with his fat mother and Nam vet dad, who I guess beat him or something. Anyway, Mikey died. I can't remember what he died of.

—But you said you had a dream.

—Sure, and, in my dream, a bunch of us young punks are sitting on the old porch outside my grandma's house, and Mikey is there for some reason. Maybe no one has the heart to tell him to get lost. But, anyway, I look down the street—this is in the old neighborhood—and these two worthless punks, Sean and Sean, are walking up the street in their black jeans and jean vests with the heavy metal and skull patches, and Sean One sees us and cocks that shit eating grin he use to have... I bet the little fucker is in prison...

—Or dead.

—Yeah. I'd like to know, but I don't see any way to find out.

—Internet?

He considers.

—Possibly. I don't remember last names, though, so kind of hard.

—Anyway, Sean One and Sean Two— they were both, unbelievably named Sean, spelled exactly the same way, if you can believe that— get this evil look between them when they see poor dumb Mikey sitting there, and they start taking bets about who could punt him, like a football, through the plate glass window of my grandmother's house.

—Oh God.

—Nice guys, right? Anyway, they seem to be serious, and right away, I start to panic. And I go up to Sean One, and I say,

—C'mon guys, enough is enough! But Sean One just gives me that same grin, like maybe he's joking, maybe he isn't. I'm not sure at this point, but I know one thing: money starts to change hands. Nickel and dime stuff, but kids are sitting around laughing, like it's all some sort of big joke. Which, to them at least, I guess it is.

—Anyway, Mikey is sitting there with snot running down his nose, suspecting nothing, and all of a sudden Sean One sort of takes a few steps back, as if gearing up, and Sean Two starts to sort of cheer him on in this macho,

sportsmanlike way, and all the eyes go to Sean One's size ten steel capped boots, and he gets a little run going and before you know it, he's running up to little Mikey as if he's a human pigskin, and he straight kicks him in his oversized cranium, And the rest of this has to be a dream, because if it was real, you'd never believe the evidence of your own eyes.

—And so Mikey goes sailing in a great arc through the air. I was at a heavy metal show one time, and this kid got smacked in the kisser, and went sailing through the air, and everybody screamed. He got up and shook it off, but it was really miraculous to see. But Mikey wasn't so fortunate.

—He goes sailing through the air like a human football, and smashes against the plate glass window with a sickening plop-crack. You can hear the picture window burst, but it never actually caves in, which is a miracle in and of itself. But he actually bounces off the thing, and lands on his little ass, his head lolling over with teardrops of blood trickling down his skull.

—He sits there like a little rag doll for awhile, his face a hideous mask of bewilderment and pain. I'll never forget that look, as if he were born to be tortured by the whole world, chewed up and spat away. Then suddenly, the wound in his head begins to bubble up some sort of white drool, looks like chopped celery and piss. It runs down his face in gushing streams. Right away, I know he's a dead man.

—Everyone else has panicked and split the scene. Sean One just stands there, his huge shark-grin stretching incomprehensibly across his face. He's staggering a little. I make out he's higher than a kite.

—I rush into my grandmother's house, grab the phone, dial emergency. Sean has sauntered in drunkenly, laughing to himself, saying incoherent things. I turn, drop the phone, grab him by the lapels, tell him what he's done, tell him he's just killed Mikey, tell him he's now a murderer... but he doesn't care. He just continues to laugh, with that maniacal fucking laugh, and I realize, just then, how evil and insane he is. And it seems like all the evil and hideousness in the world is wrapped up in that smile. And then I wake up.

—From one nightmare to another.

—Really? Do you think the real world is really so awful?

—Of course. You saw what happened in Connecticut, right?

—Sure. I saw what the media portrayed happened. I'm not sure about all the tiny details. Maybe just the big picture.

She rolls over in bed, looks concerned. Her eyebrows acquire this strange, knitted look he finds slightly repulsive.

—Did you catch that —medical examiner? What the hell was wrong with that guy? And what was up with the cops threatening everyone about social media? I thought

this was a free country.

—Yeah, well it would have been interesting to see if they had a legal leg to stand on. I can't see anyone going to prison for some sit like that. But, you never know. But it all was pretty damn strange. There's more of course.

—Oh, I know. Like the lid got ripped off of reality for a minute, exposing something...

—Like little Mikey's brain gruel leaking out of his forehead and ears.

—27 victims. Are they serious? And now people are already forgetting. But the conspiracy theories are getting wonkier and wonkier.

Null put his arm beneath her head. He didn't imagine he could tell her how he really fixated on the whole thing, how he found himself on the internet, staring at the cold, juvenile, skull-like visage, the huge, burning eyes that seemed to eat through the viewer like little blue lasers. He could undoubtedly feel the first few stirrings of a mad lust grip him when he looked at these pictures. Even the mother seemed to be the product of superior breeding or genetics, although she couldn't be classified as desirable in the same way as the son.

—I'll tell you about J, if you want.

—Oh no, not this again.

—Hey, you wanted to hear the story, right?

—I've heard it before. But continue.

—Seems almost appropriate tonight. So bitter cold.

—Not as bitter or as cold as in here, she said tapping the

side of her head. He thought this was comically stupid.

—Well, when I first met the guy, you know, it was in a mental institution. I walked in that first day there, and I'll never forget the shock. Place looked like a dungeon: lime green tiles and brown woodwork made it seem darker, perhaps, than what it was, as if the sunlight never penetrated... the hallway lead past the dorm rooms and into the dayroom, which connected to a porch. Outside there was a courtyard, fenced in. Some kids tried to jump the fence, which wasn't high. Heh, I remember one little punk climbed over, and this black orderly, Steve, goes running after him, and, Jesus, he caught the little bastard and carries him back over like a sack of potatoes, slung over his shoulder. Oh, it was hilarious!

—Little bastard got a week of room confinement for his stunt. No one ever got away from that place. I still can't get away from it. I still have nightmares about it. She suddenly pouted her lips, looking concerned. He wondered if the look was real or feigned. He could no longer tell. He was confused about a great many things concerning their relationship.

—Poor baby. They really hurt you there, didn't they?

—Sure they did. They hurt everybody.

—Someone in a dream once told me that —Everything in nature is eaten, eventually.

—Truer words were never spoke, my friend.

She lays back, sighs. Her back must be hurting her again.

—Continue.

—Okay. So I walk into the place, and right away, I move past this little room with nothing in it. And right away I make this is the Isolation Room. There's just a scrawny guy in there with long hair, walking around in grey pajamas. Singing Pink Floyd songs.

—Strange.

—Sure, but I really liked Pink Floyd at the time—

—You still do, don't you? I heard you listening to "Ummagumma" on YouTube the other day.

—Sure. That stuff brings back memories. But anyway, he was this skinny, scruffy-looking guy with long black hair. And I stood in the doorway with my crummy little suit jacket, and we kind of looked at each other, and we knew, right then, that there was going to be some sort of special connection. And there was.

—But,

—but he could be a serious bastard, too. Bipolar as hell. I once made the mistake of touching his glasses... I set them down the wrong way or something, on the lenses. And he went ballistic, which really unnerved me. He told me he wanted to fuck some other guy there, too. A young guy. Like really young, know what I mean?

Silence.

—He said he wanted to blow him.

He sighed, said,

—But ANYWAY, we got to be friends, after a fashion. The staff barely noticed, I think, but maybe they noticed everything eventually. At any rate, at least we

could talk about Pink Floyd together.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Outside, the wind picked up into a howl. A fine mist of ice must have been falling with the blowing gale, pattering the window. The darkness was a palpable, real thing, hiding in pools of shadow in the corners of the room. He could feel time fall down on his head like a steadily increasing hammer fall.

—So?

—So things went on like that for months. I steadily increased my percentage of the fun and good times to be had in that place. Got myself a building pass, a ground pass, then became head of the patients' council. In the meantime, he had decided that he was head over heels in love with this skank that existed over on the girl's side of the ward, past the nurses's desk. She had a massive cranium, weird, squinty eyes... but she had a nice little figure. I'll never forget her walking around in black short-shorts the first night I stayed in that place.

—Sounds like a real winner. She probably grew up to become a crack whore.

—If she's still alive, she's probably four hundred pounds, has twenty bastard children, twenty five bastard grandchildren, and lives in a trailer over a sewer. Some people were condemned by God before they were ever born.

She looked away from him when he said this, perhaps feeling as if he had just uttered his own doom. He continued, heedless:

—I don't exactly remember what happened, but he got in trouble for some reason. You weren't supposed to talk to the adults in the place, not even at meal time. And we all ate in the same cafeteria together. I was the president of the ward council, little fucking angel that I was. Anyway, all I remember is him standing, like it was one of Stalin's show trials, in front of our council, and trying to explain himself. Something about that girls— did I mention how bizarre and disgusting her mouth was? —and everyone knew he had the hots for her... But, oh damn, I can't remember, but it had something to do with that and him breaking the rule about nonverbal communication with adult patients. And he's standing there, and I'm being such an obnoxious, self-important little angel, and he says —You didn't see it all. I made faces at that woman. I took my fork and I stabbed at her like this. You didn't see it, Null!

—And I just kept telling him, no I didn't, and he suddenly explodes and takes off running down the hall, and hammering the door, and everyone is quiet, but we've all seen this kind of behavior before, so it doesn't really phase us. But he gets two weeks in room confinement, and the staff make sure to separate him and that girl...

—Weird, heavy things went down right before I left. There was a ward —dance party, complete with cheesy 1980s tunes and girls getting made up... you weren't supposed to make any —special relationships while you're there, so this seems odd to me in retrospect, But every-

thing was going good, and disaster was far out of my mind.

—Now there was this skinny black girl there that was possessed, or some damn thing. And she had —special restrictions on her, levels she went up and down on depending on her behavior. And her behavior was, frequently, uh, not good...

—I remember she had a poster of LL Cool J on her door. That was the only human thing I could see about her. Otherwise, she'd wander out of her room in a drugged stupor to get her tray... she didn't go to meals in the cafeteria like everyone else. And sometimes you would hear growls coming out of that room, creepy shit. Like Linda Blair. Exorcist shit.

—Bitch went fucking crazy one night. Yeah. We all got back from an outing to the mall, and we came in on the ward, and there were cops, and the bitch was strapped down to a bed. She had totally flipped out, and grabbed the head nurse by the hair and started ripping. It took several orderlies to subdue her and get her strapped down. Head nurse had to go to emergency. Bad scene.

—But anyway, they kept threatening us with what they called a —ward shutdown. Which meant everyone sits out in the dayroom in silence, no nonverbal contact, no one goes to meals, gets mail, or has any other privileges. Armed cops patrol the hall way. No one goes anywhere or does anything, no fun. From daybreak till bedtime. Of course, during a ward shutdown, there are no fur-

loughs or discharges, obviously. Terrified us into submission, especially terrified me, cause after six months in that hellhole, there was talk of me finally going home. So I definitely didn't want that.

—So we had this dance. And there was this sort of porky blonde girl and her friend, and this blonde girl was obsessed with the way she looked; staff caught her changing clothes several times a day. Compulsive behavior. Her friend I think I can still see the face, but maybe it's another face swimming up from the past... a face with no name that's gonna haunt me off and on trying to remember where and when. Isn't it funny how it can be that way sometime?

—Anyway, she got dressed up in this ridiculous Eighties thing that was like a black fedora and trench coat or something. Looked real strange with her puffy white skin, icy blonde hair, freckles... something about her was undeniably unappealing.

She rolled her eyes.

—Oh Jesus, so much detail. Too long, didn't read. Get to the point.

He felt like slapping her, but smiled, said,

—Okay. So we're having this dance, and the fedora girl—I can't remember any of these names—and her friend with the hard, lesbian face go in the bathroom. And then possessed girl, who has been allowed out to roam around free, apparently— yeah, great judgment on the part of the staff there, right? —she follows them in the

bathroom. Then a few minutes go by, and we hear a scream.

—and then the two girls come out of the girl's bathroom, and they have their arms around each other, like they have to hold each other up... and they're both balling, hard. And no one can figure out exactly what the hell has just happened. But everything falls to silence, and a heavy, ominous thing seems to settle over everything. But the next little thing that happened was even weirder. Possessed girl comes out, and falls down on the floor. And her eyes roll up in her head, and she starts growling and drooling. Seizure. Suddenly everything stops...

—My mind kind of went blank after that, although I suppose someone probably put a wallet in her mouth or something to stop her from biting her tongue off. While she was convulsing, she held her arms real stiff, like a mummy or something, to her sides, even when she was rolling around on the floor.

She piped up, saying

—Light as a feather, stiff as a board.

—Yeah. But what the hell do you suppose could have happened in that bathroom? It's always bothered me. What the hell did those two girls see that could have brought them to tears like that? Did Possessed Girl show them some kind of secret vision of Hell? Maybe her true self? I don't know. But I remember sitting at a table in the dayroom as the dance was ended, and thinking we were headed to the dreaded ward shutdown they kept

threatening us with.

—But that never happened. I went home, and my crazy buddies sometimes wrote me letters. I got one from the one that was murdered. He told me about a couple of kids that had died, about a friend who had stolen a car and went to California, about how

—all the Martians were leaving. That was how he put it.

—At any rate, it might have been a year or two later. All the letters had stopped, and I was ready to put that place behind me forever. I can't reall describe what it was like to you at that place, long stretches of miserable boredom, watching the intellectually deadening stuff that came on TV. And the lousy food, and the discipline, and being away from your family...

—Sounds a little like kiddie jail.

—Sure. Maybe not as bad or dangerous as a jail, but the same concept, I guess. I spent an entire day sitting on a chair propped against a wall, counting the bricks. Shit like that.

There was silence for a moment

Anyway, I got home from school one day, did my usual. Cranked up the metal, smoked, ate, flipped channels, daydreamed. Mom was at work; I was the typical —latch key kid, I guess. Anyway, it had grown dark outside, and maybe it was the six o'clock news. I flipped on the local station, and there was news report of a young couple that had been murdered. Showed them in their wedding

finery. And it was my old friend, the crazy guy singing Pink Floyd songs. And it didn't really phase me at the time. I just sat there in Mom's old rocking chair, staring numbly at the screen. When she finally got home from work, I didn't even bother to tell her at first. I knew the channels of communication would get crossed, somehow. She wouldn't understand who or what I was talking about.

—Thing that happened was, he met this girl at this youth psychiatric facility, and they both fell in love. And the paper called them a —mentally impaired couple. And when they both got out they got married, at twenty years old. And they moved into this little dump trailer park, I guess. You can well-imagine what the place must have been like: shitty, rundown, cops there all the time over domestic disputes, grubby little bastards playing in the dwarfed little yards; garbage and junk toys and stray animals and cars up on cinder blocks.

—Jerry Springer land.

—Yeah. But they were just starting out in life, and they already had some strikes against them. But they might have been happy for awhile. But Frank lived next door, and Frank was a sex offender, had already done time behind bars. So he gets a hankering after J's wife— we'll call him J, okay? —and he maybe tries to get close to them both. Real close. Like maybe he and his old lady are coming over to borrow things all the time, and maybe Frank is starting to get ideas boiling up in his wolf-

like brain, Maybe he can't even admit them to himself, at first. He probably fights the devil and angel syndrome... or maybe he's just pure devil. No, that's most likely.

—What the hell are you talking about?

He smiles. Looks over at her absently, his mind not altogether there in the moment. Traveling to other places and times, to scenes he'd never experienced firsthand anywhere but the heated confines of his own grim imaginings.

—Well, make a long story short, Frank invites J on a hunting trip. A hunting trip. Oh, the grim, fucking irony of it all... and he was STUPID enough to go with him, right? Never saw that one coming, huh? Didn't have some sort of premonition or divine revelation. Just, went out to the woods, with the creepy fucker lived next door, couldn't keep his eyes off of his wife.

—Maybe there was something going on there. Some sort of swinging thing, or something?

He considered. Outside, the wind moaned again, swishing trees around until the branches and leaves rattled together like the papery, thin voices of the dead.

—Yeah, yeah I thought about that. Maybe. But even if, we'll never know, right? Even if that motherfucker is still alive in prison, which I can't seem to find out one way or another, I'm sure he's no interest in spilling all the details to anyone. Probably a quiet old man, sitting on death row, waiting to die.

—Or so you imagine. And you have a pretty heated imagination.

He didn't know why she was being such a bitch right now, but he pressed on anyway.

—Anyway, so they go out to the woods. But nobody mentioned Frank having any sort of gun, right? But what he has is a hatchet. So he smashes J in the neck with it. Or the face and neck. Several times, I think I read. And J falls over, bleeding. Mortal at this point, probably.

—But Frank isn't sure. So he jumps up, steps on J's neck, begins bouncing up and down. And he breaks the neck. Anyway, old buddy is now dead. Gone to join the Invisible Choir.

—Now Frank kicks into Phase 2, right? So he hides the body, I think, or maybe he just leaves it there for the time being, and he jumps back in his car and heads back to the trailer park, where J's wife is inside and cooking dinner maybe. If they ever cooked dinner; maybe they just ate TV dinners or McDonalds or some shit. I can't see her as ever having been fucking Betsy Homemaker.

—So he goes up and hammer son the door, and he's got this panicked look on his face, and he's got blood on him, and he tells her there's been some sort of accident. And she's too confused to understand clearly what is going on, but she thinks she had better go with him... remember, the newspapers described both of these as —mentally impaired... but maybe we'll never under-

stand what goes through people's head under certain circumstances. At any rate, she jumps in the car with Frank, and Frank goes careening out of the trailer park, and out to some isolated area... really isolated. Must be close to where J's body is drawing flies.

So they get out there, and there is a little pond or creek. And she gets out, and looks around, maybe wanders around a moment, and she doesn't see her husband anywhere, hurt or otherwise, and she turns to Frank in confusion, but he's smiling now. Exultant. Definitely has a hardon. Blood coursing strong through his veins, heart burning like piston—

—So melodramatic.

He stopped. He felt the urge, again, to reach over and slap her. But he snuffed it. Instead, he said, —If you don't want to hear the rest of it.

—I know what happens. He beats and strangles her, right? Rapes her, holds her head under the pond to make sure she's finally dead. Did he rape her before or after he killed her?

Pause.

—I'm not sure. Anyway, he confessed almost immediately. What do you think drove him to do it? A demon?

—I just think some people must be possessed of a predatory nature. I had a dream the other night— this might freak you out. It was another one of the —classroom dreams... I have them all the time. Always I'm in some sort of obscure classroom, behind on some lesson. Some-

times this is a college classroom, but it's even been a kindergarten classroom before. Sometimes I'm the teacher; more often than not, I'm some sort of confused student, and I can never make out what the secret words on our worksheets are supposed to be telling me, or read what is written on the blackboard. Sometimes we're tasked with playing some sort of weird group game. Once, I think it was a drinking game, believe it or not. Miss K is there, and she was older, I loved her, although she was the teacher. She got this cruel expression on her face, and said,

—I know, but...

—She's always slipping out of your grasp everywhere, she smirked.

Pause.

—Anyway, I was in some sort of classroom, or conference room, and we have to play this game has something to do with shifting images on a video screen. I can't remember. Anyway, I know I failed at the game. She rolls over, puts her head up on one hand.

—How?

—These two strange females enter. Except, they look like they are almost inanimate, and they are floating above the floor. Their arms are folded across their chests, and their heads are lowered. One of them has a mop of dark, curly hair, and large eyes... but beyond the obvious differences, they both look like average high school kids. But average high school kids if they had been re-

cruited to do piece work for Nosferatu.

—I suddenly panic. I've just made a disastrous move in the game, lost really, and I KNOW, with sickening horror, what my punishment is to be.

—They open their jaws. Their mouths are lined with razor-sharp teeth. They begin to slowly devour my body like it is raw hamburger. They can't be fought off; I'm helpless, a dead, devoured thing.

He's rolling around in bed, in a hot little room with the skank. Her psychotic fuck of a husband has walked in on them. He's a skinny little bald guy with a bad, faded green tattoo on his arm. His name is Read —past tense. —You're not going anywhere.

He got the point. Read stalked around nervously, smoking one cigarette after another. The tattoo on his arm burned a shitty green against his pale, skinny arm. It was like an eye winking in the gloom.

—Look, you know I can't let this sort of thing go on under my own roof. I've got a reputation to uphold.

In truth, his reputation was lower than a dog turd drying on a hot asphalt highway. He inevitably smelled as foul as he looked, and his manners were straight from the jailhouse.

—I might have to kill you, Null.

—I thought you might say something like that.

The old lady props herself up, looks nonplussed. Maybe Read has killed someone before for a similar trespass.

So they start out along the hot highway, and all before them the world sizzles and fries under the radioactive solar waves.

She looks up with squinted eyes, beads of sweat trickling down her forehead and into her mouth. Her underarms are sopping, sweaty pits. Everything sticks to your skin, thermal waves warping the distance as their eyes peer into the places they will be stepping tired feet, too exhausted to quit. Before them, a distant dream of paradise and survival.

—I haven't got any food for you, she says blankly. Her voice lacks serious affect.

He's been wandering this highway ever since he escaped from the Major.

—It was a real freak scene, he tried to explain to her, but she was obviously preoccupied with her own exhaustion.

—They have technologies the likes of which you could never imagine.

He felt like he was speaking to a character in a void, perhaps part of some surreal comedy.

He responses floated, dream-like, in nonsensical eddies and swirls around his baking consciousness, not really penetrating his thoughts in any meaningful way.

It was like two people sharing time through a brick wall.

—They're coming. The ships, and the bloodsuckers. Some sort of experiment gone wrong. Broke a hole through into another dimension.

He slowed his pace a little. She was obviously quite mad. Beads of sweat were trickling down her cheeks. But, hadn't he seen enough of madness in the past few days to become accustomed to it.

Behind her, the procession of the damned straggled across the sweltering pavement, their shadows stretching out behind them like grim memories of a time forgotten by God.

The madness of this particular parade was puzzling, but perhaps, wasn't as bizarre as his last experiences with the Major, who had driven to a cliff overlooking a low valley, and had driven their car off the edge, all the while intoning, in a dry, philosophical manner, his opinions on life, death, and the nature of reality,

—You have to pay attention to quantum mechanics, because the world we think of as real is just a thin veil, behind which, the true, cosmic consciousness lurks, like a seething basilisk, making its inscrutable designs on a world that cannot fathom it.

And, as Null screamed in his seat, holding his hands up before his face, the car careened off the edge, flipped in the air, and impacted the ground below, flipped completely over.

Miraculously, they were not killed.

It was as if they had rocketed off the cliff to the moon. Null was upside down in his seat. The Major seemed to have already floated out of the crushed driver's side seat, and was outside, his spit polished boots visible through

the broken windshield as he surmised the incredibly minimal damage.

Null crawled out through the window on bleeding hands and knees, but stood up almost weightlessly, feeling as if he were floating. The car did not seem much worse for wear. The Major, who now seemed to have grown to gigantic proportions in Null's mind, put out his massive hands and, with a strength Null would have never believed any living man could possess, righted the car, which was only slightly dented on top.

Null suddenly felt a huge hand lift him back into the passenger seat, and the car sped up a little incline toward the same spot it had previously come off of.

—Ready to do it again, *kimosabe*?

The major looked over at him. Null eyed him in stoned wonder, realizing the depth of the man's insanity, before the car plunged over the cliff once more.

Somewhere, out along the hot August highway, the straggling troop of refugees marches into the sunset. She sweats and weeps silently in the gathering gloom, drawing flies, listening to the silent prayer call of her own heated, mislead imaginings.

But all of that was ahead for him, somewhere in the future. Right now, he had traveled, via bus, to the home of the Great Dictator. Or some facsimile thereof in the first or second degree.

They were gathered like disciples around the foot of their forlorn messiah. But he was no Christ-like figure; not, anyway, that Null could see. He, in fact, looked like he was speckled in filth, and was perhaps recovering from a dismal drunk. An older man with a putty face going to fat, a wobbly belly, long tapering fingers that seemed to creep out in front of his face in arthritic claws, and movements that seemed to border on the physically challenged— or, maybe just the inebriated.

—Oh, my, you've all come a long way.

The disciples gathered around were, in point of fact, part of the internet cadre that the Master had been putting together for years. He had become somewhat notorious for his cult-like cyber following, and the controversy of his ideas.

—None of which could be easily explained.

—It's a pleasure to finally meet you, sir. The man sitting next to Null had a square jaw, a long face, round glasses, and smelled faintly of bad, licorice-flavored candy or

cough drops. Some of the men were large, obviously sweating bullets in the hot Florida sun, and the funk of their perspiration was overcoming the power of their various aftershaves.

Null realized it was sweltering in here, thought the Master probably didn't believe in air conditioning, and was surprised when a frumpy woman with dust in the creases of her face came up to him, said —It's too damn hot. I'm turning on the air whether you like it or not, and he smiled and obviously relented.

His smile spread across his face in slow motion. It was like the blossoming of an after thought.

—Of course... I never thought it would grow... the way it has... over the years... Our opposition is very strong, both locally and globally...

Null had no idea what the old man was talking about, and felt his attention wandering. In the next room, spilling through an open doorway into the one where they presently sat, were a number of enormous, gaily-wrapped seeming Christmas packages.

A few of the packages were gradually brought in by the woman and an old black man, who laid them down with proud smiles.

The old man suddenly seemed to drone upward from his monotonous speech, and rose from the couch, a bit more excited perhaps, his arms held out in front of him, his fingers twitching as he bent to examine packages.

—Oh, oh my... we've received so many, many gifts lately...

I wonder how on earth we'll ever manage to open them all... or what we'll do with them. We'll need... we'll need... my yes, we'll need someone to help us figure out how to assemble... all of this...

Later, Null and another man examined the shack outside. It was a dark little space with a pitted, rutted dirt floor that looked as if it had been dug into recently.

—So this where?

The man couldn't continue.

They both felt, oddly, as if they were walking on sacred ground.

—Yeah. This is where. 20 little bodies buried here. Some sort of mass cemetery. The house belonged to a serial killer. He remained undiscovered until his death.

—Must have been many years ago?

—Yes. But, can't you feel it? The hungering in here? Sense of empty hunger?

Null looked at his companion strangely.

The air in here was stifling,
and tinged with some smell he couldn't quite place.

It was a smell that was, at least, heavy and slightly oily
and noxious and shitty all at once.

Like dogs must have been penned in here at one point.

—I'm not sure what you mean.

Are you suggesting that their spirits continue on here,
Somehow?

I'm not sure

I can believe that.